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THE FLINTSTONES
WONDER WOMAN 1984
AGENTS OF S.H.I.E.L.D. SEASON 7

+ MUCH. MUCH MORE

THE
**EMPIRE
STRIKES BACK**

The STAR WARS
Sequel Turns 40!

ISSUE
472

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to STARBURST Issue 472.

Being fans of sci-fi and fantasy movies, we are a bunch that have a heightened awareness of apocalyptic menace lurking behind every corner. I grew up watching the end of our current civilisation played out in movies such as *Logan's Run*, *When Worlds Collide*, *The Andromeda Strain*, and *The Omega Man*. Yet, despite the worrying potential for future extinction, you had parents and other influences to reassure you that everything will be fine. There was no need to be concerned. Even as you grew older, you were able to rely on the fact that the elected heads of our nations had this all sorted. Yet, early dissemination of these ideas through cinema helped to keep alive a nagging doubt about all of this. Many of us were never totally sold that everything would be ok. As I write this editorial after ten weeks of enforced isolation against a killer virus that has run rampant across our planet, it's not much consolation that we got a heads up. Many of us are still shocked, have possibly lost loved ones, and daily asking ourselves, "How the fuck did this happen?"

I know that I do not have to explain why this issue was delayed. I can only hope that you take some comfort from the fact that our independently owned and run magazine was able to keep going thanks to your support. Issue 472 of STARBURST has been a labour of love even more than usual. We are a team of friends that have been separated and having this magazine to produce has been a glue that kept us bonded together. On any of the bad days, we were comforted by the fact that we would get this issue out to you, and here it is. I am not going to go on about how great it is or go over the content. Instead, I speak for all of us at the magazine when I say that we hope this at least passes some time in a fun way. Maybe taking your mind off things, if only for a little while.

COVID-19 has been the stuff of sci-fi come alive with immeasurable mental and physical ramifications for everyone, but it is finite. It only feels like it is going to go on forever. But for however long we have to endure this challenging period of our lives, I can offer this guarantee. All of us at STARBURST will be here with you, and we will put out as many issues as possible.

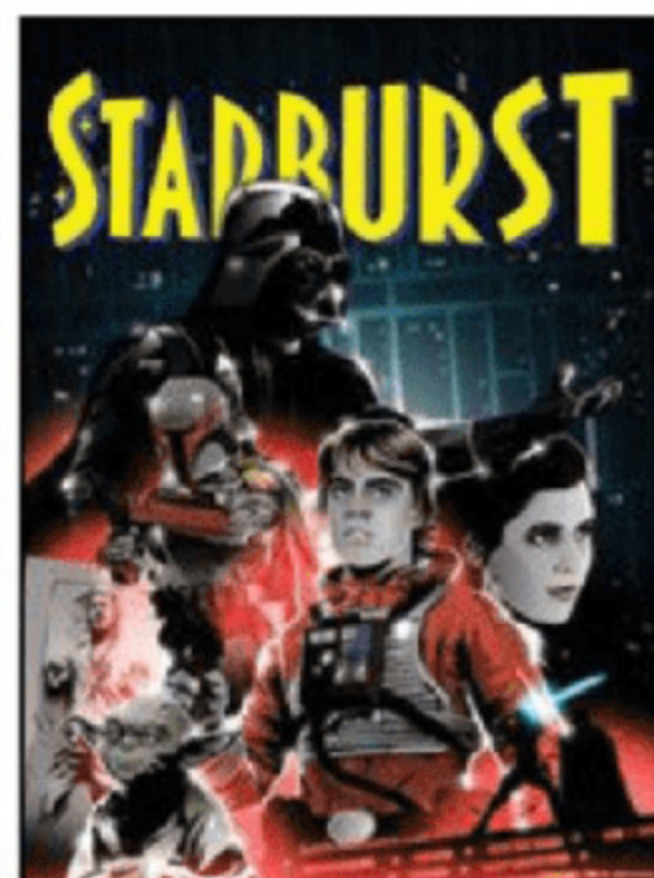
I would like to thank you for buying this magazine and continuing to support us. Please feel free to email any of us here if you feel you want to chat. Or join in with the STARBURST Radio Show on FAB Radio International every Wednesday at 8pm. Banter right now is good for all of us.

Take care, you lot...

Until next issue, more than ever before, keep watching the weird and wonderful,



Jordan Royce



Buy directly from STARBURSTMAGAZINE.COM and choose from our **Newsstand cover** or **Collectors' Edition cover**.

THE RADAR

Given the recent devastating events, the vast majority of theatrical releases will naturally no longer be arriving as reported in previous issues. In a special edition of **The Radar**, which we very much hope will remain a one-off, here's a complete guide to the release date reshuffles that affect our most anticipated movies (and **Peter Rabbit 2**), and when you can now expect to see them in the comfort of your nearest, adequately equipped multiplex. Diaries at the ready, readers...

July 24th

• **MULAN**

August 14th

• **WONDER WOMAN 1984**
• **THE SECRET GARDEN**

September 25th

• **CANDYMAN**

November 6th

• **BLACK WIDOW**

November 12th

• **NO TIME TO DIE**

September 20th

• **SOUL**

December 11th

• **FREE GUY**

January 15th, 2021

• **PETER RABBIT 2**

February 12th, 2021

• **THE ETERNALS**

March 5th, 2021

• **GHOSTBUSTERS: AFTERLIFE**

March 19th, 2021

• **MOBIUS**



April 21st, 2021

• **FAST & FURIOUS 9**

May 7, 2021

• **SHANG-CHI AND THE LEGEND OF THE TEN RINGS**

July 2nd, 2021

• **MINIONS 2: THE RISE OF GRU**

July 30th, 2021

• **JUNGLE CRUISE**

October 1st, 2021

• **THE BATMAN**

November 5th, 2021

• **DOCTOR STRANGE IN THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS**

November 19th, 2021

• **MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE 7**

February 18, 2022

• **THOR: LOVE AND THUNDER**

July 29th, 2022

• **INDIANA JONES 5**

November 4th, 2022

• **SHAZAM! 2**

• **MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE 8**



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STARBURST

NEXT ISSUE: 473 ON SALE FROM JULY 30TH

THINGS TO COME

A ROUND-UP OF THE
BEST (AND WORST)
OF THIS MONTH'S
MOVIE / TV NEWS



STAR WARS

So it appears that if, like us, you were chomping at the bit to make a trip to Galaxy's Edge, we're all going to have to wait a lot longer as theme parks around the world adjust to the ramifications of the pandemic. But for **Star Wars** fans longing to sample the sights and sounds of Black Spire Outpost there's a new hope, and it doesn't even require you to leave your home - ILMxLAB has announced a new VR experience, **Tales from the Galaxy's Edge**, which will transport us through hyperspace to the planet of Batuu! (If you've got an Oculus device that is. At least it's cheaper than a plane ticket.) Having already bowled us over with their **Secrets of the Empire** and **Vader Immortal** VR wizardry (the latter finally coming to PS4 this Summer!), ILMxLAB will now treat us to a new multi-layered interactive adventure set between **The Last Jedi** and **The Rise of Skywalker**. Otherwise known as: the two-year period we naïvely believed that J.J. Abrams and the guy

who wrote **Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice** would actually stick the landing.

As we can all agree, however, **The Mandalorian** certainly didn't disappoint, and with Season 2 now confirmed to be keeping its October release due to the team having wrapped photography pre-crisis, news has been spreading fast across the HoloNet as to what we have to look forward to. Firstly, expect lots of familiar genre faces to be fleshing out its ever expanding cast, with Micheal Biehn, Timothy Olyphant, Temuera Morrison, Katee Sackhoff, and Rosario Dawson all confirmed so far. While we're yet to learn who the **Aliens** star Biehn will play, persistent rumours are that the others will be appearing as Tatooine sheriff Cobb Vanth of the **Aftermath** book series, and icons of the recently-wrapped **The Clone Wars** Captain Rex, Mandalorian warrior Bo-Katan, and Ahsoka Tano herself. The latter is also heavily theorised to be the focus of a newly announced live-action Disney+ **Star Wars** series from **Russian Doll** co-creator Leslye Headland. New blood behind the camera, meanwhile, will consist of the legendary Robert Rodriguez, pictured

above with Baby Yaddle (just as likely), and **Ant-Man's** Peyton Reed.

In the most significant **Star Wars** news to break since last issue, however, we've finally learnt who will helm the next theatrical release. (Which most certainly won't make its original date of Christmas 2022 now, but we're very much okay with that.) Having wowed with his work on **The Mandalorian** season finale *Redemption*, the mighty Taika Waititi has accepted the hot-seat, and will work from a screenplay co-written by himself and 1917's Krysty Wilson-Cairns. Even if this turns out to be two more hours of IG-11 learning to lift boxes and not drop them on lizards, we're in. | KH

SCREAM AGAIN

With a new **Scream** movie confirmed earlier this year, it's now been announced that David Arquette has signed on to return as Dewey Riley, and that main franchise protagonist Neve Campbell has entered talks to pick up once more as Sidney Prescott. Previously, it was unclear whether this Spyglass Media production was to

be a reboot, an all-out remake, or whether it would veer in some other path, but this news now confirms the movie will indeed be a full-on continuation of what we've seen in the four **Scream** films to date. In some encouraging news for those of you who are maybe a tad trepidatious about the **Scream** franchise being brought back to life, **Ready or Not** duo Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett are on directing duties. All being well, **Scream 5** will start principal photography later this year. | AP



Undoubtedly the biggest piece of DC TV news to come out since our last issue is that Ruby Rose will *not* be returning for **Batwoman's** second season. Rose, of course, is the headline act of the show, having first turned up as Kate Kane in the Arrowverse's 2018 **Elseworlds** crossover. Since then, the character had her own **Batwoman** series premiere last October. With fan response largely positive towards the show, The CW is keen for **Batwoman** to continue on with someone else taking over the Kate Kane/Batwoman gig. It's believed that it was Rose's decision to step away from the show. At one point in time, a **Batwoman** stunt saw Ruby suffer a back injury that was scarily close to ending in paralysis for the actor, and so that could well have played a part in her unprecedented decision to hang up the cape 'n' cowl.

Only a week or so before news of Ruby Rose's **Batwoman** departure broke, The CW Chairman Mark Pedowitz revealed how there are tentative plans to do a crossover event between **Batwoman** and the impending **Superman and Lois**. That is apparently still the case, and **Superman and Lois** has been powering forward over recent weeks. Production on the new Arrowverse offering has yet to officially get underway due to the restrictions currently in place on the entertainment industry, but that hasn't stopped **Superman and Lois** expanding its cast. Most recently, **The Vampire Diaries'** Wolé Parks has signed on to play a series regular called the Stranger. Described as a mysterious visitor hellbent on proving that the world no longer needs Superman, it may possibly be that this character ends up being a changed-up spin on Justice League Dark's magical Phantom Stranger. Parks joins a cast that includes Tyler Hoechlin and Bitsie Tulloch as the titular couple, Jordan Elsass and Alexander Garfin as their twin sons, Emmanuelle Chriqui as Lana Lang, Erik Valdez as Lana's husband Kyle, and Dylan Walsh as General Sam Lane. The current plan is for **Superman and Lois** to have a 13-episode first season, which will hopefully premiere towards the end of the year.

While big-screen DC offerings are similarly on hold a little right now, one interesting nugget of silver screen news to come out just as we were going to print is that Henry Cavill may be reprising his Superman role. Despite Warner Bros and Cavill's Super relationship coming to an end two years ago, talks are now ongoing for Cavill to once more pick up where he left off in **Man of Steel**, **Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice**, and **Justice League**. From

A round-up of what not to miss this month on...

horrorchannel

by Martin Unsworth

JUNE 19TH - FROM A HOUSE ON WILLOW STREET (2016)

A band of kidnapers get more than they bargained for when they snatch a young girl from the titular house. All hope for a ransom payoff soon disappears as they realise the girl could actually be demonic. Sharni Vinson from **You're Next** plays the head of the gang.



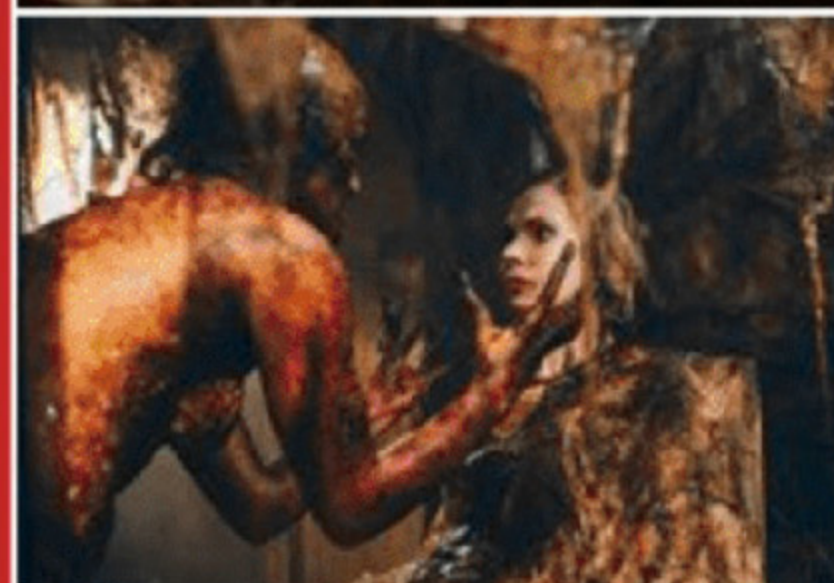
JUNE 21ST - MONSTER! (1999)

A horror film festival gets really scary when one of the screen monsters comes to life. Directed by John Lafia, who helmed **Child's Play 2** and featuring a spirited performance from M. Emmet Walsh, it's a fun watch for fans of old-school creature features.



JUNE 24TH - BITE (2015)

A woman suffers a terrible transformation after being bitten by a seemingly innocent insect. Chad Archibald (**I'll Take Your Dead**) directs this icky shocker that'll have you reaching for the topical cream and bug spray.



JULY 4TH - THE REZORT (2005)

If there was a holiday location you could go to (remember those days?) where you could hunt zombies for sport, would you? Well, as horrendous that idea sounds, some would. Still, as you'd expect - particularly in a horror film - things go spectacularly wrong at this particular getaway: cue flesh munching and the prospect of a new zombie outbreak.



JULY 12TH - DON'T HANG UP (2016)

Crank telephone calls are all fun and games until someone gets homicidal, which is what happens in this **Saw**-esque game of cat and mouse as a pair of pranksters have some high stakes to deal with when the tables are turned.



JULY 18TH - RESIDENT EVIL (2002)

Paul W.S. Anderson's adaptation of the massively successful video game sees Milla Jovovich play Alice, fighting against the T-virus zombies with Umbrella Corporation commandos in a secret facility under Raccoon City. Overblown but fun, it manages to get the thrills of the game while adding new elements and paving the way for five sequels.



For small screen action, **Star Trek** continues with episodes from **The Original Series** scheduled throughout the month, and **The Next Generation** reaches its second season as part of the Sci-fi Zone (which also includes the underrated **First Wave**). A return to Moonbase Alpha in Series 2 of **Space: 1999** is also on the cards, and the Stephen King adaptation **Under the Dome** continues.

Horror Channel is available on Sky 317, Virgin 149, Freeview 70, Freesat 138, and TalkTalk 487

WATTO'S EMPORIUM

MERCH NEWS - WITH JACK BOTTOMLEY



The messy and lingering legal battle over the **Friday the 13th** franchise has raged for some time now, and God help us should we ever do a **F13** retrospective feature (watch this space...) because the story is crazier than that time Jason fought a girl with telekinesis. But, in spite of the legal battles, against all odds, an officially licensed **Friday the 13th** board game is now on the way!

A survival horror game experience, **Friday the 13th: Horror at Camp Crystal Lake** will take you and your friends on a deadly game, as you take on the roles of the cliché camp counsellors (party animal, nerd, nice guy, final girl, jock, diva) as you gather supplies and your nerve, to endure the onslaught of icon Jason Voorhees across five nights. Combining chance, strategy, and survival skills, this could be the next 'must play' for those wanting to spice up their games night.

The board game comes loaded with content and looks absolutely fantastic and is the biggest treat for franchise fans (outside of a new movie, of course) in ages. Included in the box is six player boards, a cabin board, 67 supply tokens, ten critical supply cards, 88 blood splatter tokens, six escape tokens, 64 fear cards, six player tokens, six backpack cards, one night tracker, one camp bag and, of course, a rule book (if only the characters in the films had one of those). The game looks wonderful and is sure to make the entire horror-loving family a bunch of happier campers, before they're potentially butchered that is... game night can always get hardcore like that.

Leaping out of Camp Crystal Lake this summer like a final jump scare in one of the flicks, this board game experience gives us something to look forward to and, should you still be isolating when you read this, would be ideal! What better way to wile away the nights than with ol' Hockey mask face trying to dismember you! Well, it'll make a much welcome change from Netflix, Internet-fuelled procrastination and a tut-tut worthy browser history, that's for sure! Plus, new exciting licensed merch like this was not expected any time soon, so the fact this exists may re-ignite hope that we will get a new film outing sooner than we think. We can only dream.

Ki ki ki, ma ma ma...

what we're hearing, there are currently zero plans for a new solo outing for Cavill's Boy Scout. Instead, these talks seem to be either for Cavill's Superman to make a cameo appearance in another upcoming DC-centric picture - such as **Shazam! 2**, **Aquaman 2**, **The Flash**, or **Black Adam** - or to have Cavill shoot additional footage for **Justice League: The Snyder Cut**. Which takes us nicely on to...

After plentiful fan demand, Zack Snyder's intended vision for 2018's **Justice League** is finally happening! With Twitter running wild with #ReleaseTheSnyderCut for the longest time now, the call has been made to have the director get to work on the fully finished movie that he'd initially intended for audiences to see three years ago. If you recall, **Justice League** director Snyder had to depart the director's chair midway through production due to the tragic loss of his daughter. In his place, Joss Whedon stepped in to finish **Justice League** - a move which saw the tone of the film change, certain scenes be left on the cutting room floor (Darkseid!!!!), and other sequences outright not being shot. Expect **Justice League: The Snyder Cut** to drop sometime next year. | AP

THRONES DUO TO VAMP IT UP

In some fantastic news, **Game of Thrones** tandem Peter Dinklage and Jason Momoa are teaming up for an action-horror vampire offering titled **Good Bad & Undead**. From Legendary Pictures, Dinklage will play Van Helsing, while Momoa is a vampire who has taken a vow to never kill again. The duo run a scam, going from town to town as Van Helsing takes a hefty payday to vanquish the vamp from these locales. Unfortunately for the pairing, things take a turn for the worse when a lofty bounty is placed on the head of Momoa's bloodsucker. **Freddy vs. Jason's** Damian Shannon and Mark Swift concocted this idea and put the screenplay together, with **Palm Springs'** Max Barbakow to direct. | AP

DOCTOR WHO

The **Doctor Who** community has seen a remarkable burst of creativity during lockdown; creators and fans have watched episodes together over social media, and heaps of new content has been put together to keep our spirits up. Here are a few outlets to check out: **Doctor Who Lockdown** on YouTube, curated by Emily Cook, features new mini-episodes with scripts by Russell T Davies, Steven Moffat, and Neil Gaiman; the official **Doctor Who** website has published stories by a selection of the show's writers; **Fantom Events** has moved their **Who** conventions online, with many new interviews up on their YouTube Channel; and the **Homemade Who** project has invited fans to recreate their favourite scenes in their living rooms.

As to the TV show itself, cameras finished rolling on this year's festive special, *Revolution of the Daleks*, before lockdown began, so we can still expect to see that over the Christmas period. It's not yet clear, however, to what extent the production and broadcast of Series 13, expected in 2021, has been delayed.

Nevertheless, there are lots of other official **Who** content coming soon. BBC

Studios have announced **Time Lord Victorious**, a multi-platform story which will bridge the **Doctor Who** novel, audio, comic, and video games ranges, as well as collectibles and even the escape rooms, across these media. It will tell a vast story set at the Dark Times at the beginning of the universe, featuring the Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Doctors as they fight a deadly new enemy, the Kotturuh, who dispense mortality across the cosmos.

Also announced from BBC Studios is a special edition of Patrick Troughton's first story, *The Power of the Daleks*. With the original footage from 1966 completely missing, an animated reconstruction was released in 2016, and July 6th will see an updated version made available on DVD and Blu-ray, with improved animation and a vast range of special features.

Finally, we have to send our condolences to the family and friends of Pip Baker, who wrote for the show in the 1980s with his wife Jane, and who died in April at the age of 91. | KM

STAR TREK

In perhaps the least surprising **Star Trek** news in years, CBS has finally confirmed that we're getting the long-rumoured Captain Pike series. **Star Trek: Strange New Worlds** will see the return of Anson Mount as Pike, Rebecca Romijn as Number One, and Ethan Peck as Spock, detailing their adventures aboard the pre-Kirk Enterprise. The Enterprise crew made their debut in - and were by far the best thing about - Season 2 of **Discovery**, and fans have been campaigning for a spin-off ever since, something which the powers-that-be, in particular head honcho Alex Kurtzman, have repeatedly said they're aware of. "When we said we heard the fans' outpouring of love for Pike, Number One, and Spock when they boarded *Star Trek: Discovery* last season, we meant it," said Kurtzman. "These iconic characters have a deep history in *Star Trek* canon, yet so much of their stories have yet to be told. With Akiva (Goldsman) and Henry (Alonso Myers) at the helm, the Enterprise, its crew and its fans are in for an extraordinary journey to new frontiers in the *Star Trek* universe." Akiva Goldsman is, of course, already known to **Trek** fans as one of the executive producers of both **Discovery** and **Picard** (and, as we like to remind people, was the writer of **Batman & Robin**). Co-showrunner Henry Alonso Myers is a new addition to **Trek**, coming off Syfy's **The Magicians**.

After the heavily-serialised **Discovery** and **Picard**, Goldsman says the show will feature a return to the classic **Trek** format of standalone episodes, as well as taking a more optimistic view than its somewhat dystopian contemporaries: "We're going to try to harken back to some classical *Trek* values, to be optimistic, and to be more episodic. Obviously, we will take advantage of the serialised nature of character and story building. But I think our plots will be more closed-ended than you've seen in either *Discovery* or *Picard*. I imagine it to be closer to the original series than even *DS9*. We can really tell closed-ended stories. We can find ourselves in episodes that are tonally of a piece."

No news yet on when or where the

show will air internationally, but it seems likely to be late 2021 at the earliest. It's the fourth officially announced upcoming series after the Michelle Yeoh-starring **Section 31** show (originally due to start shooting after **Discovery** Season 3 wrapped a few months ago, but has been delayed), the animated **Lower Decks**, and the still-untitled Nickelodeon show, all of which are still in production. Like Season 3 of **Discovery** (currently in post-production) and Season 2 of **Picard** - which was scheduled to start shooting, well, around now really, we'll see all these shows at some point when it's safe to go outside without an EV suit. | IR

DANCE MAGIC, DANCE

Having been in loose development for the past four years, The Jim Henson Company's **Labyrinth** sequel now has Scott Derrickson in its director's chair. Derrickson is best known for helming genre offerings such as **Sinister** and **Doctor Strange**, and he was at one point attached to direct **Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness** before departing that follow-up due to the ever-familiar creative differences. A screenplay from **Detective Pikachu's** Nicole Perlman was previously in place on this **Labyrinth** sequel, but Derrickson has brought in **Into the Dark's** Maggie Levin to pen a new script. In the 1986 **Labyrinth** from Jim Henson, a young Jennifer Connelly had to embark on a quest to rescue her infant brother from the centre of a strange maze overseen by David Bowie's Jareth the Goblin King. | AP

MARVEL

Across the pantheon of Marvel movie and TV news, the only real noteworthy story of these past few months is that S.J. Clarkson is to direct a mystery Marvel picture for Sony. Clarkson has previous history with Marvel, having helmed episodes of **Jessica Jones** and **The Defenders** for Netflix. As for what this mystery movie could be, rumours suggest that the film could well be the **Madame Web** offering that Sony has long been wanting to do. Created by the legendary duo of Denny O'Neil and John Romita Jr., **Madame Web** debuted in 1980's **The Amazing Spider-Man #210**. Born blind, Cassandra Webb developed psychic abilities during her younger years and ultimately ended up in a spider's web-shaped life-support system after her central nervous system was affected by a disease. **Madame Web** would occasionally dip in and help out Peter Parker, not to mention several incarnations of Spider-Woman. Most famously to casual fans, **Madame Web** appeared in the iconic '90s **Spider-Man** cartoon from FOX - in which she was voiced by Joan Lee, the wife of a certain Stan the Man. This **Madame Web** movie is one of a number of projects in development as part of Sony's shared Spider-Verse of films that began with **Venom** and is soon to continue on with **Morbius the Living Vampire** and **Venom 2**, with rumored plans afoot to give solo movies to the likes of Black Cat, Silver Sable, Kraven the Hunter, Silk, Jackpot, Nightwatch, and, unlikely as it actually is, Aunt May herself. | AP

Stories by ANDREW POLLAND, KRIS HEYS,
IAIN ROBERTSON, and KIERON MOORE

NEWSBURST

THE BEST OF THE REST

Having knocked it out of the park with his risky yet ultimately spellbinding remake of horror classic **Suspiria**, Luca Guadagnino is to once again invite the recreational outrage of casual film fans the world over by tackling a second sacred title, gangster opus **Scarface**.

+++

Arcade frequenters in the eighties would agree that you'd need Tony Montana-levels of disposable cash if you were to stand even a remote chance of beating the notoriously difficult **Dragon's Lair**. The groundbreaking (yet, let's face it, borderline unplayable) laserdisc-powered cabinet game is next set to port over to live-action film courtesy of Netflix, with Ryan Reynolds suiting up as Dirk the Daring, the dopey knight in shining armour who must navigate the many dangers of Mordroc's castle in order to rescue a kidnapped princess. We hope he's got plenty of fifty pence pieces at the ready!

+++

Another high profile Netflix production heading our way in the not too distant future is **Sweet Tooth**, a TV adaptation of the critically acclaimed Vertigo comic book. Robert Downey Jr will produce the post-apocalyptic tale of animal/human hybrids through his Team Downey banner.

+++

Talking of teeth, there's more to be fangful for with the news that **What We Do in the Shadows** has been greenlit for a third season in 2021.

+++

But Nandor, Laszlo, Nadja, and Colin Robinson won't be the only familiar creatures of the night we'll be seeing on our TV screens again - the rights to Anne Rice's **The Vampire Chronicles** have been acquired by AMC (also home of many a zombie), who plan to relaunch her most famous creation, Lestat de Lioncourt of **Interview with the Vampire** infamy. It's likely the author will have more say in casting this time, thus sparing her another embarrassing Tom Cruise-style wobble.

+++

Even more bloodsuckers are inbound thanks to horror maestro James Wan, who has hand-picked **Annabelle Comes Home** director Gary Dauberman to helm his remake of **Salem's Lot** for New Line Cinema.

+++

Two more Stephen King film adaptations to break since you last read these pages: Blumhouse is banking on a remake of **Firestarter** being hot property, and novella **Throttle**, co-written by King's son Joe Hill, is being developed by new US streaming service HBO Max.

+++

There'll be throttle aplenty on the set of George Miller's recently confirmed next movie - yep, we're heading back to the world of **Mad Max** for **Furiosa**, the much-mooted prequel to **Fury Road** that will explore the early days of Charlize Theron's Imperator. Eyeing the clippers nervously as they prepare to step into the iconic role this time will be **The Witch's** Anya Taylor-Joy. Oh what a day! What a lovely day!

+++

Another surprising follow-up given the green light recently is **Upgrade**. Last year's brilliant yet largely ignored Leigh Whannell tech-thriller will receive a sequel series from Blumhouse TV and Universal.

+++

Upgrade isn't the only genre property getting a second lease of life on TV that we're excited about this issue - **Hellraiser** is being prepped for the box by David Gordon Green, the writer/director who just two years ago successfully reintroduced fellow horror icon Michael Myers to a world.

+++

A tougher horror reboot to swallow, however, is **Ghoulies**. Starting in 1985, the low-budget creature feature spawned three sequels, and could well see a revival if original creators Luca Bercovici and Jefery Levy get their way. Head over to change.org and sign their petition to persuade Sony to let them reboot it, but do it quickly, otherwise their plans will end up in the shitter. (That's a joke for the ten of you who actually remember what the hell **Ghoulies** even is.)

WORDS: KRIS HEYS

COMMEMORATION OF AN EMPIRE

40 THINGS
WE LOVE ABOUT
**THE EMPIRE
STRIKES BACK**
ON ITS 40TH
ANNIVERSARY!



40. THAT TWIST

Let's get it right out of the way up front. Yes, there have been great twists in cinema history – Bruce Willis being dead, that yucky bit in *Oldboy*, Kevin Spacey being a sex pest all along (not to mention Keyser Söze, obviously) – but few compare to the absolute jaw-dropper towards the end of *Empire*. For the best part of two movies now we'd been set up to think Vader was an

out-and-out bad guy who Luke was destined to destroy. And then with just four words, Lucas turns the entire saga on its head. It adds depth to both characters and sets things up for a thrilling final instalment. *The Empire Strikes Back's* climax may lack *A New Hope* and *Return of the Jedi's* epic space battles, but it achieves more with dialogue than a thousand exploding Death Stars ever could. | IR

It could come as a surprise to some readers, but fandom's relationship with the second entry in the STAR WARS saga wasn't the universal love-in it currently is, with audiences initially split by the movie's shocking tonal swerve, its then-frustrating cliffhanger, and the peculiar choice to have a muppet as a main character. Of course, over time, these criticisms would eventually become the very aspects that elevated its status to not only one of the best sequels ever made, but to one of the best movies ever made, period. Prompted by the film's ruby anniversary ("most impressive"), we reconvened our own Jedi Council to brainstorm a countdown that would pay an appropriate tribute to the George Lucas-produced, Irvin Kershner-directed masterpiece. Punch it....



39. THE EXECUTOR

TESB introduces us to The Executor, a Super Star Destroyer that dwarfs all other Imperial vessels around it (although it is still a fraction of the size of the Death Star). It's also Vader's home from home. It's the ultimate statement of the Empire's might, and even when doing nothing is meant to look terrifying. It replaced The Devastator as Vader's flagship, and is among the largest vehicles ever made for the Empire. As if to emphasise its sheer scale, rarely does the entire ship fit into a single frame during the movie, unless seen from a great distance. Maybe Vader is compensating for something.... | JH



36. THE DARK SIDE CAVE

The moment Luke enters the 'cave' on Dagobah (through a hole in the ground), clambering through the roots of the trees, his trusty lightsaber by his side ("What's in there?"; "Only what you take with you...") heralds perhaps the closest the saga gets to classic cinematic horror. The motif of the cave as a metaphor for self-discovery goes back to the birth of stories, and here Luke's anxieties about the power of the Dark Side come to fore. It's the foreboding atmosphere and use of slow-motion that seals the deal for the audience, though. Like Perseus on the quest for Medusa's head, Luke faces his biggest fear but we are all disturbed by what he finds. | MU



38. IT MADE HARRISON FORD A TRUE MOVIE STAR

While it's a misconception that Harrison Ford broke through from complete anonymity to superstardom in 1977's *Star Wars* (he'd had supporting roles in George Lucas' *American Graffiti*, then one of the highest-grossing movies ever, and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*), it was undoubtedly the film that made him a familiar name to cinema-goers. Roles in *Heroes*, *Force 10 from Navarone*, *Hanover Street*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Frisco Kid*,

and the ill-fated *More American Graffiti*, all followed *A New Hope*, but *The Empire Strikes Back* cemented his position and adjusted his route to megastardom. How? Beyond a stellar performance, it was *Empire* that convinced Steven Spielberg to persuade George Lucas that the man to play Indiana Jones was right under their nose, and the rest is movie history. | MN



35. THE WAMPA

The wampa is akin to the Abominable Snowman, except with a pair of goat horns. Heavy, tall, and powerful, it's the top predator on Hoth. One wampa falls foul of a momentous moment for Luke: the first time you see him use the Force and swing a lightsaber in anger. Interestingly, wampas were originally going to have a much larger role in the film. George Lucas considered opening *Empire* with a full-scale wampa assault on Echo Base, scenes that were shot but ultimately not included. A wampa pen was also going to be included inside the rebel base itself, an idea eventually scrapped, probably after it dawned on everyone just how stupid keeping those things in your home would be! | JH



37. DAGOBAH

The mist-laden, swamp and forest-filled world that Yoda took refuge on after the Jedi Order fell in the wake of Order 66, is a planet that has a mystic feel unlike any other. Largely absent of major activity, this nature-dominated world is strong with the Force and feels drawn straight out of classic myth and fables. The film - for large stretches of the plot - strands Luke here, but it was a perfect setting for the young man to take his first steps into becoming a Jedi master. Danger at every turn, droid-devouring creatures, and a spooky cave that'll make you lose your head in shock. And speaking of which.... | JB



34. THE CONTINUATION OF A STAR WARS TRADITION

There are a few *Star Wars* franchise traditions to speak of, but the frequent hand/limb-lopping is one not always discussed. Disney's *Star Wars* flicks have been lighter with this but, as continued by the prequels, the original trilogy had an early history of appendage assault (most commonly hands being taken). The first occasion was in *A New Hope* with C-3PO losing his arm after a great fall, followed not long after by Ponda Baba's infamous arm loss in the Cantina. However, *Empire* embraces the trend, with Luke disarming an unfortunate wampa early on, before Vader does the opposite of giving Luke a hand in the final clash, by lightsabering off our hero's mitt! (Mind you, Luke gives daddy dearest a receipt the next time they duel.) | JB





33. LOBOT

In the same way that Batman has Alfred, Lando has Lobot, his servant and Cloud City computer liaison officer. Sporting some chunky cybernetic implants around his head, Lobot is loyal to Lando and plays a small but important role in helping his boss double-cross the Empire. He doesn't say much. In fact, he doesn't say anything. But he adds the kind of detail and intrigue that the most imaginative *Star Wars* worlds have. Since

Empire, his backstory has been fleshed out considerably, and now incorporates just how he ended up with those implants and his struggle to liberate Bespin from Imperial control following Lando, Leia, Luke, and Chewie's escape. | JH

32. THE TOYS

It's 1980. Your mind has just been freshly blown by the first-ever *Star Wars* sequel. But those 124 minutes flew by so fast you barely had time to process what you saw and the VHS release was five years away! What to do?! Get yourself straight to Toy & Hobby, that's what. With a new *Star Wars* movie comes cool new toys, and no amount of fully-animatronic Baby Yodas will ever compare to the potency of the original 3.75" action figure line from Kenner/Palitoy, which was replenished with over 20 new *TESB*-inspired additions. Who needs a HD Digital Download on repeat when you could simply replay everything you (thought you) saw in the movie with a dozen or so bits of brightly coloured plastic and the boundless power of a child's imagination! And if, like many of us, that collection was unceremoniously binned the minute you moved out of your parents' house, we have good news - Hasbro has recently revisited the original *TESB* range with their Retro and Vintage Collections! Wonder if the Imperial Tie Fighter Pilot still smells of strawberries? | KH



31. THE RESILIENCE OF THE CAST & CREW

Ask anyone what their favourite *Empire* moments are, and more often than not, the Hoth scenes are seared into their memories. They're unforgettable for the cast and crew too - for entirely different reasons. Filming in Finse, Norway was a frozen nightmare, the area getting hit with a historic blizzard and subzero temperatures. When the crew first arrived they found all their equipment and sets buried in snow. It was so bad that Luke's escape from the Wampa Cave was actually filmed from the ski lodge where they were staying, the camera positioned in a doorway and Hamill himself the only one of the crew on the

outside! No one has a better Hoth story than Harrison Ford though, who was scheduled later in the shoot than everyone else. By the time Ford arrived, he had to catch a ride to Finse on a snowplough sent to clear an avalanche. He got there around midnight, drunk as a skunk after sharing a bottle of vodka with the driver! | VB



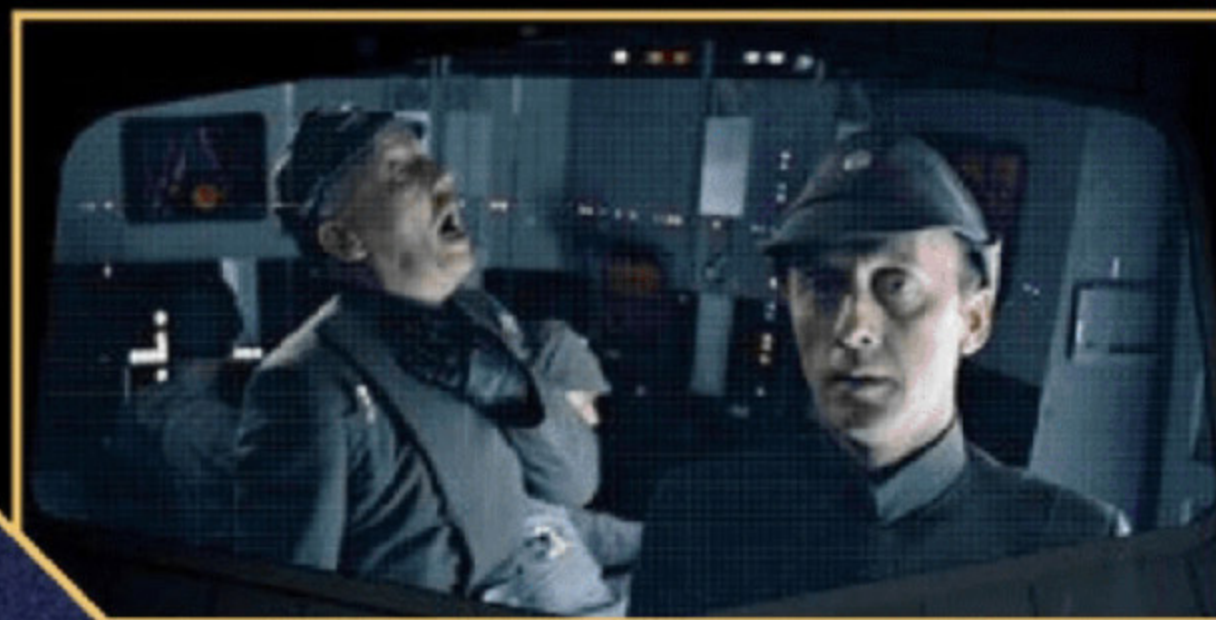
30. 2-1B

Star Wars droids span all shapes and sizes, from resilient astromechs to overwhelming battle droid infantries, but sometimes droids not involved on the front line are just as awesome. *The Empire Strikes Back* presents one such contender, in medical droid 2-1B, an Echo Base-stationed Rebel Alliance droid responsible for fixing Luke up after his confrontation with the wampa. This is not some mere background character; this droid is actually a great piece of world-building, representing our first look into the medical side of *Star Wars*. Since *Empire*, others have enriched this area, such as *The Last Jedi*'s IT-S00.2 medical droid, or *Revenge of the Sith*'s Chroom-Tan B-Machine midwife droids with their bothersome ice cream scoop-like hands! 2-1B, we salute you! | JB



29. ADMIRAL OZZEL FAILING VADER FOR THE LAST TIME

One of the coolest - and darkest - scenes in *The Empire Strikes Back* is undoubtedly Darth Vader's Force-choke. Set up perfectly by John Williams' Imperial March, an unhappy Vader instantly displays his dissatisfaction with an unlucky Admiral Ozzel - seen elsewhere on a comms screen - by choking him to death using nothing but the Force. As well as some great, almost OTT acting by Michael Sheard, it's made even better as Captain Piett is promoted in the very same moment his superior collapses to the floor. As well as inspiring many a hilarious meme, George Lucas called it his favourite death scene. | JA



28. CARBON FREEZING

Vader's plan for Luke, and Han Solo's fate, both involved them being frozen in carbonite, a process that looks every bit as haunting as it sounds. Once the process is complete, and Han's tortured figure is seen beneath the hard carbonite, it is nothing short of chilling. This is easily one of the most brutal moments of any *Star Wars* movie. The drama is heightened by there being no guarantee that Han will even survive, and the way it cuts Han and Leia's blossoming romance short. It is this heart-wrenching moment that also seems to turn Lando against his Imperial allies. Since *TESB*, carbon freezing has cropped up multiple times in the galaxy far, far away, and was recently seen as Din Djarin's method of choice when it came to delivering his bounties in *The Mandalorian*. | JH





27. THE BATTLE OF HOTH

Despite the fact that a slightly ridiculous looking, bosom-shaped cannon neutralised the Star Destroyer fleet to ensure the Rebel's escape from the Hoth system, this was still one hell of a battle! Drawing influence from real trench warfare, it was filled with explosive action and is one of *Star Wars'* most beloved and iconic conflicts. The David and Goliath battle between the *Empire's* mighty war machines even went on to influence Spider-Man himself! (Though we hear Ant-Man wasn't such a big fan. So to speak.) | JB



26. THE AT-AT REVEAL

Continuing on from the last entry, has there been a cooler moment in the whole franchise than when these hulking behemoths appeared on the horizon through the icy mist and set seismographs into spasms? With armour too strong for blasters, the Rebels knew that they had to get closer to take them on if they were to have any chance of survival. Standing for All Terrain Armoured Transport, these metallic Trojan horses were originally developed during the Clone Wars and stood at over 20 metres tall, at least until Luke realised that their major weak point was to just hogtie the damn things with the Snowspeeder tow cables. R.I.P. Dak Ralter! | JG



25. CLOUD CITY

High above the clouds of Bespin, there floats a beautiful metropolis named Cloud City. Run by Lando Calrissian, it profits by mining Tibanna gas from the planet below. It is also home to a myriad of races who see it as a sanctuary from the events unfolding

elsewhere in the galaxy. Cutting a deal to keep the Empire out of this haven, Lando sets into motion a series of events that sees our heroes find the city a potential deathtrap as both Vader and Boba Fett arrive to take them apart, one by one. The views are understandably amazing, even if the air may be a little thin. | JG

24. LANDO CALRISSIAN

Ol' smoothie managed to stand out as one of *Empire's* - and indeed *Star Wars'* - most memorable characters. Charming and roguish with a glint in his eye, Lando's good looks betray his originally dishonest intentions. But after his shock at realising that the Empire are, in fact, the bad guys (who'd have thought?), he becomes the hero we know him as now. His relationship to Han is as complicated as it needs to be, and his attempts to woo Leia fall somewhat flat, but most importantly, he emerges as an important ally in the fight against evil. His rousing return in *The Rise of Skywalker* is a testament to how well this dapper, smooth-talking gentleman went down in *Star Wars* folklore. | JH



23. THE MYSTERY OF LANDO'S FALCON FASHION

Dapper Lando may be, but there's one fun, fan-debated exception: after spending most of the film in a dashing cape, Calrissian can be seen piloting the Millennium Falcon as they set off to rescue Han... while wearing Solo's clothes. It's apparently a meaningless costume choice, but once you see it, it's just a bit weird. *Family Guy* even took time out of their *Empire Strikes Back* parody specifically to point this out (and with Brian talking directly to the camera, it was one of the most memorable parts of that special). But we should point out that Lando fled Cloud City in a hurry. We see his journey to the Falcon; at no point did he have the chance to stop at his place and pack. And after an adrenaline-charged chase through the city, he was probably stinking. So he goes into the Falcon and has to make do with what's there. Which turns out to be a dead ringer for Han's shirt and vest combo. So then, do we blame Lando for wearing Han's clothes? No. We blame Han for only owning one outfit. | SV



22. JULIAN GLOVER

The Empire Strikes Back, like all movies in the franchise, has its fair share of cameos, but Julian Glover's maybe our favourite. Many know Glover as *The Last Crusade's* Walter Donovan, or *For Your Eyes Only's* Aristotle Kristatos, but he's had an enormous career spanning TV (*Game of Thrones*) and film (*Harry Potter*) and his small role in *Star Wars* was brief but impactful. His 3.75" action figure was simply named 'AT-AT Commander' by Kenner, and he really was 'the' commander as he led the Empire to their victory on Hoth by taking down the Rebel's shield generator. As General Maximilian Veers, Glover's part in *Star Wars* may only be small, but the beloved classical English actor gave us another memorable villain to add to the annals. | JB





21. THE OTHER CAMEOS

Further to Glover's appearance, the movie contains many more noteworthy cameos. The legendary conceptual designer and artist Ralph McQuarrie features as Pharl McQuarrie, a Rebel General on Hoth, and he was joined by *A New Hope*'s matte artist and *The Empire Strikes Back*'s matte painting supervisor Harrison Ellenshaw, who likewise played a Hoth Rebel. In fact, the Rebellion had more stars in their midst, with *Cheers* actor (and future Pixar stalwart) John Ratzenberger playing a Rebel, alongside actor Treat Williams, who ended up playing an Echo Base Trooper after visiting the set. Meanwhile, actor Jeremy Bulloch, while playing Boba Fett, also featured in a cameo role as Empire Lieutenant Sheckil at Cloud City, after filling in for an unavailable actor. | JB

20. WILLROW HOOD

Another blink-and-you'll-miss chap occupying the corridors of Cloud City is Willow Hood, aka Ice Cream Guy, who is seen running with an odd-looking device in his hands. According to the lore (and confirmed in a Season 1 episode of *The Mandalorian*), he's carrying a camtono, a sort of high-tech safe.

To those in the know though, it's obviously an ice cream maker. (In fact, camtono means ice cream!) He's also got one of the easiest costumes to make, because all you need is a Sear's brand Model 245 Ice Cream Freezer (or a bucket) and an orange boiler suit. This has led to a thing called 'The Running of the Hoods', a tradition at *Star Wars Celebration*, in which everyone dresses up as Willow and runs around the convention centre. A great example of fans being fans! | EF



18. THE BOUNTY HUNTERS

Star Wars has sometimes excelled at making classic characters out of limited screen time, but *The Empire Strikes Back*, in many ways, perfected the trend - one scene, in particular, stands out like a hefty bounty! On a bridge of Vader's Super Star Destroyer, the heavy-breathing Sith lord addresses a ragtag group of colourful mercenaries, each cooler looking than the last, who are tasked to hunt down the crew of the Millennium Falcon and bring them back alive and un-disintegrated. Since then, each bounty hunter here has garnered a fan following, from Dengar and Bossk's *The Clone Wars* adventures, to IG-88's *Forces of Destiny* appearances, to 4-LOM and Zuckuss' expanded universe stories. Then there's that other guy.... | JB



17. BOBA FETT

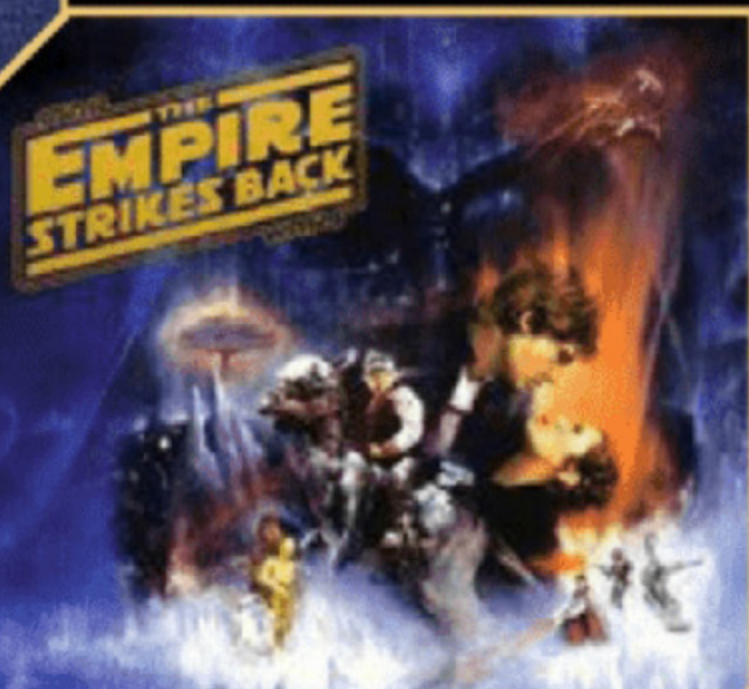
If we're honest, Boba Fett didn't do anything particularly exciting in the entirety of *Empire*. He spoke a few lines, waited in debris for the Falcon to set off before tailing it, and fired a gun a few times. But sometimes, when you're just badass, that's all you need. Fett has been responsible for much *Star Wars* lore ever since, from the Mandalorians to the Kaminoan cloners, to the bounty hunters guild, he was the character that inspired it all. Few people in *Star Wars* have as huge a fanbase. While he technically debuted in the infamous *Star Wars Holiday Special*, the feared bounty hunter made his real start in Irvin Kershner's masterpiece and - unlike so many other antagonists - he actually got his man! | JB



19. THE SCORE

Has there ever been a hotter streak in music than the run John Williams enjoyed between *Jaws* in 1975 and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* in 1984? *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Superman*, *Raiders*, *E.T.*, all indelible compositions in the soundtrack of cinema that resonate as strongly with us today as they did on release. Add to that incredible list *The Empire*

Strikes Back, the gold standard for movie sequel scores. It wasn't the first time he had revisited prior works - 1978's *Jaws 2* holds that distinction - but who can argue against The Imperial March, The Asteroid Field, and Yoda's Theme. Williams would compose further entries for *Star Wars*, *Indy*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Harry Potter*, but *The Empire Strikes Back* stands above them all. | MN



16. TAUNTAUNS

Although they may resemble two-legged oversized goats, Tauntauns are actually a species of snow lizard that roam wild on Hoth. Domesticated by the Rebels to use as transport on a planet that freezes vehicle engines,

they prove to be very useful when patrols are needed to keep a lookout for any pesky Imperial droids or wandering wampas. Considering they are accustomed to the weather conditions, they aren't afraid of having a moan when they're getting too cold. Oh, and in case you were wondering, they smell worse on the inside than they do on the outside, even if they make a handy sleeping bag in an icy pinch. | JB

15. FORCE GHOST OBI-WAN

When Obi-Wan tells Vader that he will become more powerful than he could possibly imagine should he be defeated, it wasn't clear what he meant. *Empire* gives us a clue. Just before Luke abandons Yoda's training to help his friends, Obi-Wan appears in a ghost form, blue light emanating from around his body. Until now, he had only been a voice that talked to Luke seemingly from nowhere. To 'survive' death in this way points to the incredible potential of the Force, a power that is expanded on even further in the subsequent films. It's just yet another way that *Empire* added to *Star Wars* lore in fascinating, mind-bending ways. | JH



14. THE ASTEROID CHASE

Backed by John Williams' absolutely riveting score which is at its very height in this breathtaking sequence, Han, Leia, Chewbacca, and C-3PO's daring and death-defying navigation of an asteroid field to evade the Empire's Star Destroyers was pure cinema. It's an edge of seat exhilaration with a pulse-racing exhibition of big-screen heroics. Sat there seeing (or rather experiencing) Captain Solo defy the odds (not that we'd ever tell him about 'em) and enter an asteroid field for cover and escape Vader has to be one of *Star Wars*' most exciting moments, not to mention one of the most constantly unpredictable.... | JB



13. THE EXOGORTH

....Case in point: when the Millennium Falcon crew found a cave to ride out the TIE Bombers raids in, all seemed well, until some pesky Mynocks that is! If only those winged critters and their power cable gnawing was all that they had to worry about. "This is no cave," says Solo to a startled Leia. Indeed

not, and as a big set of pearly whites start slowly closing ahead of the Falcon, cinema audiences everywhere met the mighty Exogorth, commonly referred to as 'that space slug'! Our heroes almost got digested there; a peril that would actually repeat itself in the next film with the Sarlaac. (Note to self: avoid toothy space landscapes.) | JB



12. LORTH NEEDA'S APOLOGY

Lorth Needa is the Imperial Lieutenant Commander of the Star Destroyer Avenger, who gives chase to the Millennium Falcon shortly after it escapes the asteroid field. However, he manages to lose them, unsure where it could have gone. Humbled, he boards The Executor and apologises to Vader directly. The look on his face says he probably knows what's coming. Vader takes it in good spirits, choking the life out of him before mockingly accepting his apology, ticking off yet another cool-but-disturbing dark lord moment. The Falcon, meanwhile, floats away with the rest of the garbage. Watch closely for a semi-bloop when troops come to take Needa's body away. He visibly locks his legs to help himself up, even though, y'know, he's dead and all. | JH



11. THE UGNAUGHTS

Isn't it amazing how something so small can years later turn into something so big? *Star Wars* is full of these instances, and *The Empire Strikes Back*, in particular, has a few

examples. Already we've mentioned the bounty hunters and big bad Boba but little did we know the hardworking Gentes natives the Ugnaughts, introduced in this film, would have a sizeable legacy, in fact, this often gets overlooked (sorry, we really aren't intending for all these short puns, honest). Maybe this is largely down to Nick Nolte's character Kuiil in *The Mandalorian* reviving interest in the alien species and shedding light on their past as Imperial slaves. Respect the Ugnaughts. We have spoken. | JB



10. THE GREAT AND POWERFUL OZ

Diehard Frank Oz fans know Yoda is one of his greatest characters, but the role almost wasn't his. Initially offered to Lucas' friend Jim Henson, he was unable to do it and suggested Oz as a replacement. Little did they know, Oz was about to perform one of the most difficult roles of his lifetime. In order to stay hidden on set, Oz crammed his six-foot, two-inches, twelve and a half stone body into a tiny bunker, making it impossible for him to see or hear anything. Even worse, the mineral oil used to create Dagobah's swamp-like atmosphere made him so nauseous he had to wear a gas mask. To lighten the mood, Oz had one of his other iconic characters, Miss Piggy, visit the set - much to the delight of co-star Mark Hamill! | VB





9. BEN BURTT
As much as the visual spectacles of the galaxy that had been developed by ILM or the creature shop creations of Stuart Freeborn, the sounds of *Star Wars* helped anchor us in the reality of the exotic worlds we were about to visit. By the time we reached *The Empire Strikes Back*, creatures like the tauntaun, the wampa, and mynocks were added to the pantheon we had met in 1977 and *A New Hope*. The scream of the TIE Fighter, the blast of a laser, the roar of the Falcon or the clank of an AT-AT, all created and manipulated by his team and married to the iconic music of John Williams. *Star Wars* owes Burtt and Sprocket Systems (the original name of Skywalker Sound) a huge debt. | MN

8. SNOWTROOPERS

Specialist stormtroopers who were trained for operations in arctic conditions – although we're not too sure how many ice planets there are in the *Star Wars* universe beyond Hoth and Carac – these Imperial troops used breath heaters, insulated suits, and protective hoods along with belt capes, rugged boots and survival backpacks. The invasion of Echo Base managed to put the Rebels on the back foot, causing them to evacuate, but in a similar vein to their trooper brethren, these hooded army men still struggle to shoot for toffee, allowing Solo and the others to escape to fight another day. | JG



7. THE ROMANCE

"I love you", "I know". We all know it and love it. Crazy to think were it not for Harrison Ford having a chat with the makers, we might have got a bit of wordier exchange. The budding and feisty romance between Han and Leia is undoubtedly *Star Wars*' greatest ever love story. Free of some of the, shall we say, soppy dialogue (oh George you hopeless romantic you) that Anakin and Padmé had to do battle with years later, Han and Leia's connection is more real, built on resilience and strength, as the cause brings together two warriors, two allies, two rebels in love, and makes the Cloud City carbonate-freezing send-off more emotionally powerful. Just don't dwell on that Luke and Leia snog. | JB



6. THE COMEDY

One area people often overlook in critical discussion of *Empire* is the film's impeccable sense of humour. Of course, when you watch it, you come away reeling from the twist, thrilled by Luke vs Vader, or humming John Williams' Imperial March, but you also find yourself quoting some great lines of comic dialogue. "Who's scruffy looking?" and "laugh it up fuzzball", anyone? Han was dynamite in this film, with his back and forths with Leia or C-3PO, and let's not forget Yoda's tomfoolery, or C-3PO's problematic re-assembly in Cloud City where we learn that while Chewie plays a mean game of Dejarik, the Wookiee certainly ain't got a future in droid maintenance! | JB



5. IT GAVE US OUR FIRST PEEK UNDER THE HOOD

Up until *The Empire Strikes Back*, Vader was virtually a monster; his backstory was that of a failed pupil turned "more machine than man". It was not until *Empire* that the galaxy's most feared individual was anything closely resembling a human. Of course, this was cemented later in the film with that twist, but a good while before that shattering moment, there is a brief glimpse at the scarred head beneath the helmet. As General Veers is set to update Vader, we see him sat in a meditation chamber, and before the machine fits his helmet back in place, we see Vader is still a man, and this glimpse at his inner humanity (literally) seeds things to come. Anakin still lives within that machine. | JB



4. THE ADVANCEMENTS IN SPFX TECHNOLOGY

After the release of *Star Wars*, the special effects genie was out of the bottle as the wizards at ILM moved to other projects – *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Battlestar Galactica* to name two – to hone their craft for the advancements that *The Empire Strikes Back* would require. The scale of work required for the sequel was dizzying compared to the 1977 original, and advancements in technology and process included go-motion, which gave ILM the capacity to add motion blur to tauntauns and AT-ATs. Quad printers to eliminate matte lines, the Dykstraflex camera system, and Kodak manufacturing bespoke film stock for ILM to use would combine to see *Empire* push the envelope even further on the road to the company's magnum opus, *Return of the Jedi*. | MN



3. THE EMPEROR

We weren't fully introduced to the evil Sith lord Emperor Palpatine until Ian McDiarmid donned the robe in the next film, but *The Empire Strikes Back* gave us our first-ever glimpse. Darth Vader was bad news, but little did we know that the order of command only grew more sinister, as a remarkably hierodule-like Vader answers the call of his master by hologram, and anyone who Vader kneels to is seriously not to be trifled with (less kneel before Zod, more kneel before old sod). Originally played by a masked Marjorie Eaton, with Clive Revill providing the voice, 2004 saw McDiarmid reprise his iconic role and replace them, in what has actually become one of the most well-received adjustments to the original movies. | JB



2. IT'S A SEQUEL THAT DIDN'T PLAY BY THE RULES

Looking back at *Star Wars* 42 years on, its heroes journey storyline now seems well-trod. Series such as *Harry Potter* and *The Matrix* have followed in its path, but no one could have imagined the twisting road *The Empire Strikes Back* would take its viewers on. It placed the main battle at the start of the film, found a diminutive master hiding on a swamp planet, and revealed the villain was the heroes father. What two films are more different than *A New Hope* and *The Empire Strikes Back*? *TESB* took the spirit of its predecessor, but instead of rehashing it as so many sequels do, the movie wove a very different, darker path towards the trilogy conclusion three years later. | MN

1. THE EMPIRE DOES, INDEED, STRIKE BACK

The title warned us that the bad guys were going to come back to kick the Rebellion's arse, but it's amazing just how far the movie pushes it. Even before the Rebel's Hoth base is destroyed, Luke – the seemingly invincible hero – gets the shit kicked out of him by a yeti. Then, after the crew of the Falcon spend most of the movie fleeing for their lives, we get to that ending. Lando's betrayal, Han frozen in carbonite then shipped off to Jabba, and Luke thoroughly bested by Vader – both physically mutilated and emotionally crushed. Not only was it the best set-up for a final act ever, for an audience primed to expect more of *A New Hope*'s feel-good heroics it was a devastating gut-punch, unforgettable even four decades later. | IR



Naturally, a feature like this can only go so far in articulating STARBURST's affection for one of the most beloved films of all time, so now we pass the baton over to you, the reader. Search your feelings and let us know on our social channels what we've left out, and what you love about *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK*...

WORDS: JACK BOTTOMLEY | JAMES HANTON | MARK NEWBOLD | JD GILLAM | KRIS HEYS | VANESSA BERBEN | IAIN ROBERTSON | JONATHAN ANDERSON | ED FORTUNE | MARTIN UNSWORTH | SCOTT VARNHAM



THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

After a three-year wait, The Star Wars sequel is finally in our cinemas. John Brosnan saw the film and asks, "will The Empire Strikes Back open up the way for further sequels or will it be the last in the series?"

The *Empire Strikes Back* is widely regarded as the best of the *Star Wars* series of trilogy movies, yet upon its release back in 1980 it received a much less warm reception. I remember leaving the cinema on the day of release, and the disappointment was palatable. This mood was captured by legendary *STARBURST* columnist John Brosnan, who wrote a review that was to become the stuff of legends. Brozzer took the gloves off and gave a voice to the murmurings with a clinical takedown that put Yoda firmly in his place. The response to this review dominated the *STARBURST* letters page for many months and resulted in death threats to poor old Brozzer. So, here it is. Reprinted in all its glory. Ready to transport you back to a time when *Empire* was not so fondly embraced...

Jordan M Royce
Editor

There was an atmosphere of eager anticipation in the Dominion Cinema, London, before the start of the media preview of *The Empire Strikes Back*. There was also a certain amount of tension - you felt that the audience was willing the movie they were about to see to be as good, or hopefully even better, than *Star Wars* and were anxious not to be disappointed. There were cheers and applause when the curtains finally parted - the audience cheered the Fox logo and even the censor's certificate, and applauded all the harder as the titles filled the screen ...

"Just why is *The Empire Strikes Back* a disappointment?"

Some two hours later, when the credits began to roll, there was more applause but this time it sounded restrained and a little forced and now the atmosphere was one of disappointment. I know I felt disappointed but I wasn't sure exactly why. *Empire* was certainly no dud - it was entertaining, often exciting and visually dazzling (and put such recent sf movies as *Star Trek* and *The Black Hole* completely in the galactic shade) - yet the audience, and I, felt distinctly let down. Why? Part of the reason for my bad humour at that stage was having had to spend the whole movie sitting next to a Mundane and his small son (for those

who don't know - a "Mundane" is, in science fiction fannish slang, anyone who isn't a science fiction fan. There are a lot of Mundanes in the world, as you've probably noticed). When it soon became apparent that the pair of them intended to make more noise than the Imperial Stormtroopers on the screen I had made my displeasure known, only to be informed by the Mundane that it was ridiculous for me to be upset because it was "only a kid's movie" and I was spoiling his son's enjoyment. "He gets excited at these sort of things," he then told me. "So do I," I replied menacingly.

He then actually offered me a couple of pounds to leave and come back and see the movie "some other time". This was a first for me - I've been threatened with physical violence in cinemas when admonishing some noisy patron but never been offered money to leave before. This could be the start of a whole new career. But as it was a media screening and I was there to review the movie I declined his offer. Twentieth Century-Fox, please note.

But all that aside just why is *The Empire Strikes Back* a disappointment? Well, one reason is that practically all sequels fail to live up to the originals because the film makers are invariably faced with the impossible task of repeating the ingredients that made the first film a success while making a different film at the same time. The sequels that are most successful tend to be remakes of the original work as opposed to real sequels (*Jaws 2* is a perfect example of this approach, as are the Bond films - the same story is filmed again and again while only the sets are changed). And Lucas wasn't just making a sequel to an ordinary, popular film but to the most successful film in the history of the

cinema - a huge challenge whichever way you look at it (though he didn't direct *Empire* there is no doubt that he is the real creative force behind it).

Lucas, to his credit, hasn't taken the easy way out and simply remade *Star Wars*, instead he has bravely attempted to develop the story and the characters from where they left off in the previous movie. Yet while this is commendable it's also the main reason why *Empire* is a letdown. Let's take a look back at *Star Wars* and examine why it was such a great success.

Ignoring all the theories about the time being ripe for the first big-budget, spacefantasy extravaganza etc, *Star Wars* had the advantage of being an almost perfectly constructed adventure story built around the perennially popular "quest" or "mission" theme. It had a beginning, a middle and a satisfying end. Young Luke Skywalker was enlisted to help Princess Leia deliver the vital information to the rebel forces that would enable them to destroy the Empire's giant space fortress, the Death Star and to do that he first had to rescue the Princess from the clutches of the evil Grand Moff Tarkin and Darth Vader. True, there was a sub-plot concerning Luke's discovery that he was the son of a Jedi Knight and therefore one of the select few capable of learning how to manipulate the mysterious and powerful "Force", but this was incidental to the main story in *Star Wars*. The movie climaxed with a big battle that saw the destruction of the Death Star, and the death of Moff Tarkin, and ended on a high note with an uplifting victory ceremony that sent the audiences out of the cinemas with a smile on their faces and a bounce in their step. *The Empire*, however, doesn't have the benefit of this classical narrative structure. In fact, it doesn't have much of a structure at all. It begins with an





"Empire begins with an exciting bang and then fragments in all directions, splitting up the characters along the way."

exciting bang then fragments in all directions, splitting up the characters along the way, and ends on a very bleak, downbeat note that may leave certain younger members of the audience downright resentful...

The reason it has no structure is that it is just one episode in a much larger story. As Tony Crawley explained in issue 22, **The Empire** is Part 5 in Lucas's planned 9-part **Star Wars** saga. Now the cliff-hanging ending would be fine if we knew we were going to be able to see part 6 next week, next month or even six months from now but I think expecting us to wait anything between 18 months and 3 years before we find out what happens next is a bit much on the part of Lucas and Company (there is a rumour that the movie **Raiders of the Lost Ark**, currently being directed by Steven Spielberg at Elstree, is actually **Star Wars: Part 6** but even if this is so it's still going to be a long time between instalments). I sincerely doubt that it's possible to successfully harness the serial format to a series of feature films. For one thing the cinema audience isn't a static entity - it keeps changing from year to year - yet Lucas and Kurtz are behaving as if it's just one big **Star Wars** fan club that will patiently wait as the whole story is slowly unwound over a period of 10 to 15 years...

Because **The Empire** is simply one episode in a bigger story it has no self-contained plot and therefore no satisfactory resolution or cathartic climax. It also lacks a satisfactory focus - in **Star Wars** this was provided by the Death Star and I was slightly surprised at how much I was aware of its absence in **The Empire**. The Death Star, I realise now, was an important ingredient in the overall structure of **Star Wars** and without its equivalent **The Empire** is like **20,000 Leagues Under the Sea** without the Nautilus.

Instead of having a specific goal as they did in **Star Wars**, this time our heroes have little to do but flee the Imperial forces after the initial battle on the Ice World (these sequences are probably



the most memorable in the movie and should have been used as the climax). The main plot element is Luke's continuing development as a Jedi Knight and while I could just about take all the pseudo-mystical waffle about the Force when it was simply an incidental part of **Star Wars** I'm finding it more than a little tedious now that it's been promoted to stage centre. Judging by the emphasis he places upon it I suspect that Lucas himself takes it all very seriously and it might even mirror his own personal philosophy (student film maker of small stature discovers hidden powers within himself and defeats the dreaded Hollywood Empire - which means that in reality Ben Kenobi is Lucas's old mentor, Francis Ford Coppola). Or is he just being shrewd in figuring that today's youth have a need for this sort of stuff, particularly in America. After **Star Wars**, for example, Alec Guinness started getting letters from people in America saying: "You've altered our lives. You must come and live with us..."

But what I found really tedious was Luke's new Jedi teacher, Yoda. He, or it, is a cross between Gollum and a Hobbit and, small as he is, a little of him goes a long way. Admittedly he's an ingenious creation in the technical sense, being none other than one of Frank Oz's Muppets, but after a few minutes of his company I was yearning to stuff him in the nearest Black Hole. If we must have Muppets in **Star Wars** let it be Miss Piggy (Pigs in Space?).

I suppose the most disappointing thing about **The Empire**, apart from the diffused narrative, was the apparent lack of originality. **Star Wars** was, after all, the first movie to reproduce in the cinema, scenes and settings that had previously only existed on the covers of sf magazines and comic books. But since

then, of course, there have been several movies featuring giant space ships, space battles, alien creatures and alien landscapes. Lucas and his team have become victims of their own success - their original vision has become diluted by all the imitations that followed in the wake of **Star Wars**.

I said "apparent" lack of originality because, though this was the overall impression I received, there was a lot of original material in **The Empire** but unfortunately most of it was featured in the early section of the film, the Ice World sequences, and its impact had rather faded by the end. For example, the creatures (called Tauntauns) that Luke and Solo were seen riding, and the incredible walking fortresses used by Darth Vader's men to attack the rebel stronghold (beautiful model animation!). But after that it was back into outer space with the space ships again. The special effects in these subsequent sequences were excellent, as one would expect, but it's all become too familiar now, while the floating city which provided the setting for the end section of the movie was okay but a mite tacky and certainly no substitute for the Death Star (I also thought that the matte paintings used in these sequences weren't up to the standard of the ones used in **Star Wars**).

"The refreshing streak of humour, which was established in **Star Wars** was still very much in evidence."

Okay, that's enough complaining - what did I like about the movie? Well, as I said at the start it was entertaining and what more can you ask from a movie? (No, don't answer that.) It had plenty of pace, except for the scenes with the ghastly Yoda, and the refreshing streak of humour that was established in **Star Wars**, and is so rare in most sf movies, was still very much in evidence. Most of the humour was, inevitably, provided by the two robots but many of the other characters were given the occasional amusing moment also. Even Lord Darth Vader got the chance to display his sense of humour though naturally it was rather on the dark side ("Apologies accepted," he tells an Imperial Officer after strangling him for committing an error). Solo and Leia's funniest moment came just before he was about to be carbonfrozen (or whatever) - "I love you," she told him. "I know," he replied solemnly. At least I presumed it was meant to be funny. (Actually I thought their love affair was both unconvincing and a serious misjudgement on Lucas's part.)

The battle between Luke and Darth Vader at the end of the movie was well staged, and the subsequent cliff-hanging finale was suitably nerve-wracking but it all just wasn't enough somehow. I guess what I wanted to see after all was a remake of **Star Wars** done "differently" and though, as I noted earlier, Lucas has commendably refused to go that route I wonder if I was alone in that wish or will it be shared by the film-going public as a whole? Has Lucas misinterpreted the reasons for the success of **Star Wars** in presuming that the audience want a vast saga spun out over a number of years?

Will his long-term gamble pay off or will the whole thing grind to a halt. Well, despite all my reservations I sincerely hope it doesn't. But I also hope that with future instalments he and his writers manage to make each film satisfyingly self-contained instead of just being a spectacular fragment of a great whole, as was **The Empire Strikes Back**.





THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES....

BY ED FORTUNE

While our heroes' post-EMPIRE STRIKES BACK adventures have only just begun to be canonically chronicled by Marvel Comics, this intriguing era in the galaxy far, far away has already been explored in the hugely ambitious multimedia sequel project, SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE. We take a shortcut through the World Between Worlds to travel back to 1996, the year it all began....

The nineties was a weird time for the *Star Wars* franchise. With 1983's *Return of the Jedi* a distant memory to some and a cherished memory to others, Lucasfilm felt that they were out of practice. Not with the movie-making thing, but with the whole 'producing lots of really cool tie-in merchandise'. And so *Shadows of the Empire* was born, a *Star Wars* storyline that would have tie-in video games, toys, books, and comics. It even got its own soundtrack, composed by Lucasfilm regular, Joel McNeely. Everything you'd expect from a *Star Wars* movie release, only without an actual movie attached.

Set between *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, this tale fills in the gap and answers questions that no one was really asking at the time. It was also a bit of the lore that hadn't really been explored in the tie-in

media before, so it was ripe for cross-platform storytelling experience. Which is media speak for 'you've got to buy everything to get the full story.' The whole thing feels very '90s era, with big and bold storylines and 'less edgy than they think they are' subplots.

The plot is really a greatest hits compilation of both *Empire* and *Jedi*. We get chases on speeder bikes, the odd bit of romance, the heroes in silly disguises, huge and scary-looking machines, and bounty hunters. The central core of the tale is Leia and friends attempting to rescue Han Solo before he gets to Jabba's Palace. This sees the Rebels team up with a chap called Dash Rendar, who is essentially a diet version of Han Solo with a more rugged look. Though Luke and Dash fail to rescue Han, they do stumble across many Bothans and their plot to obtain plans for the second Death Star.

Boba Fett gets his own tale in all this; basically, his attempt to deliver Han to Jabba is fraught with peril and we get to see various bounty hunters turn up to have a cameo throughout Fett's storyline. Meanwhile, Luke gets marked for death by the story's big bad, a lizard-like crime lord called Prince Xizor who is trying to get the Emperor's favour. Xizor is basically a contractor for the previously mentioned second Death Star and he's meant to be a master schemer, but he's more like a cartoon villain. Xizor is assisted by an attractive human-looking android called Guri, who's apparently functional in every possible way. (She's also an assassin, because this was written in the nineties.) Xizor considers Darth Vader a rival and plots to usurp the Sith Lord, which makes Vader deeply unhappy and more dangerous than ever before. Given that he's trying to kill Luke and he's also helping

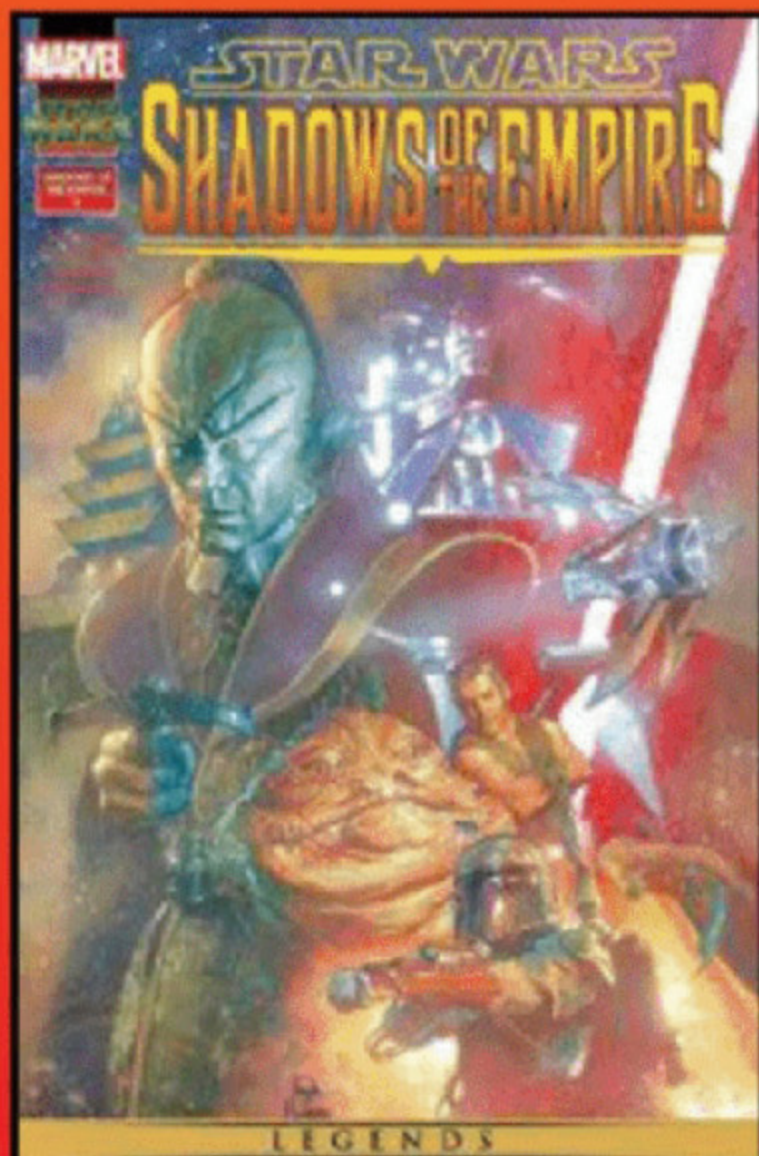


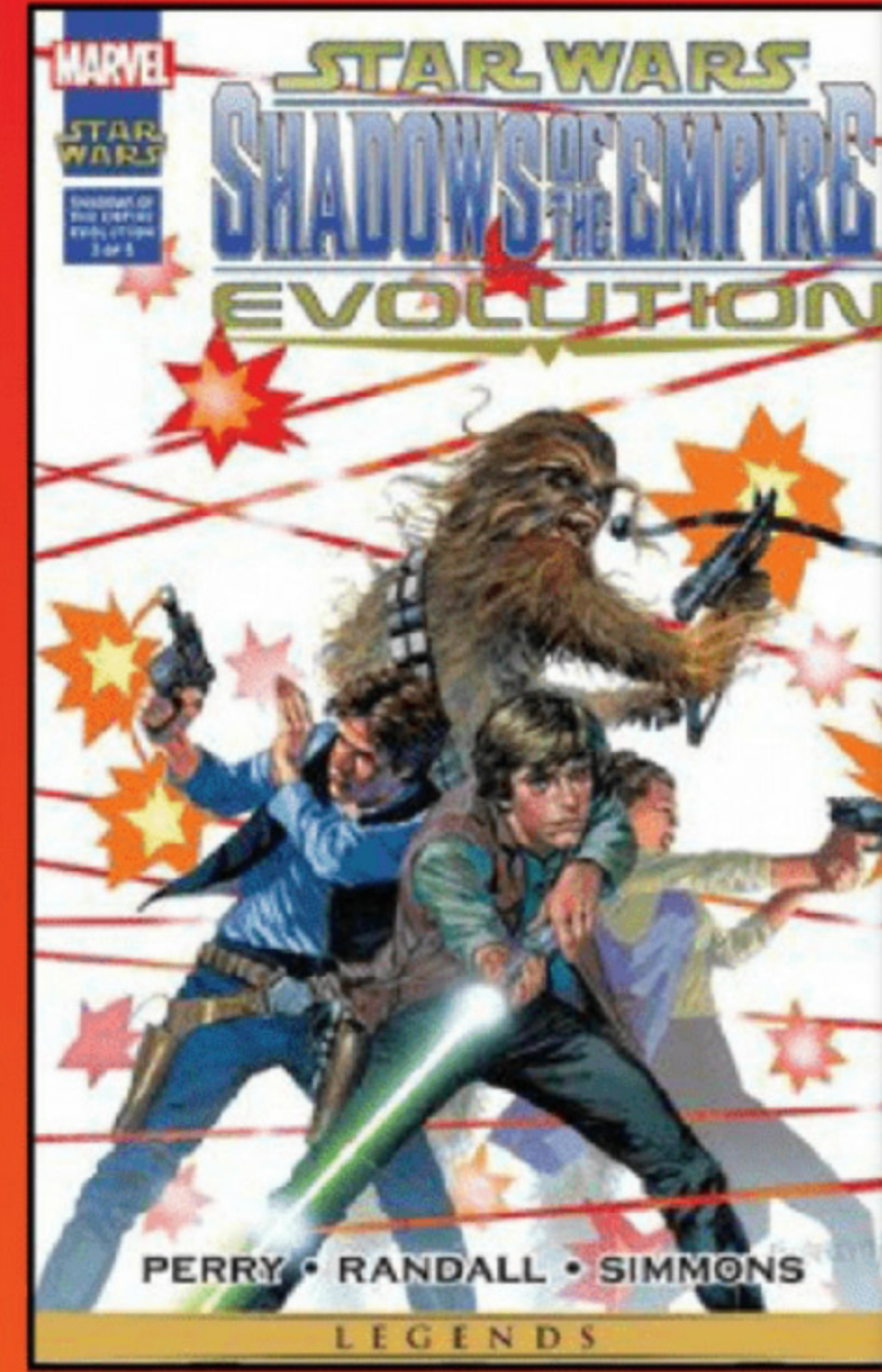
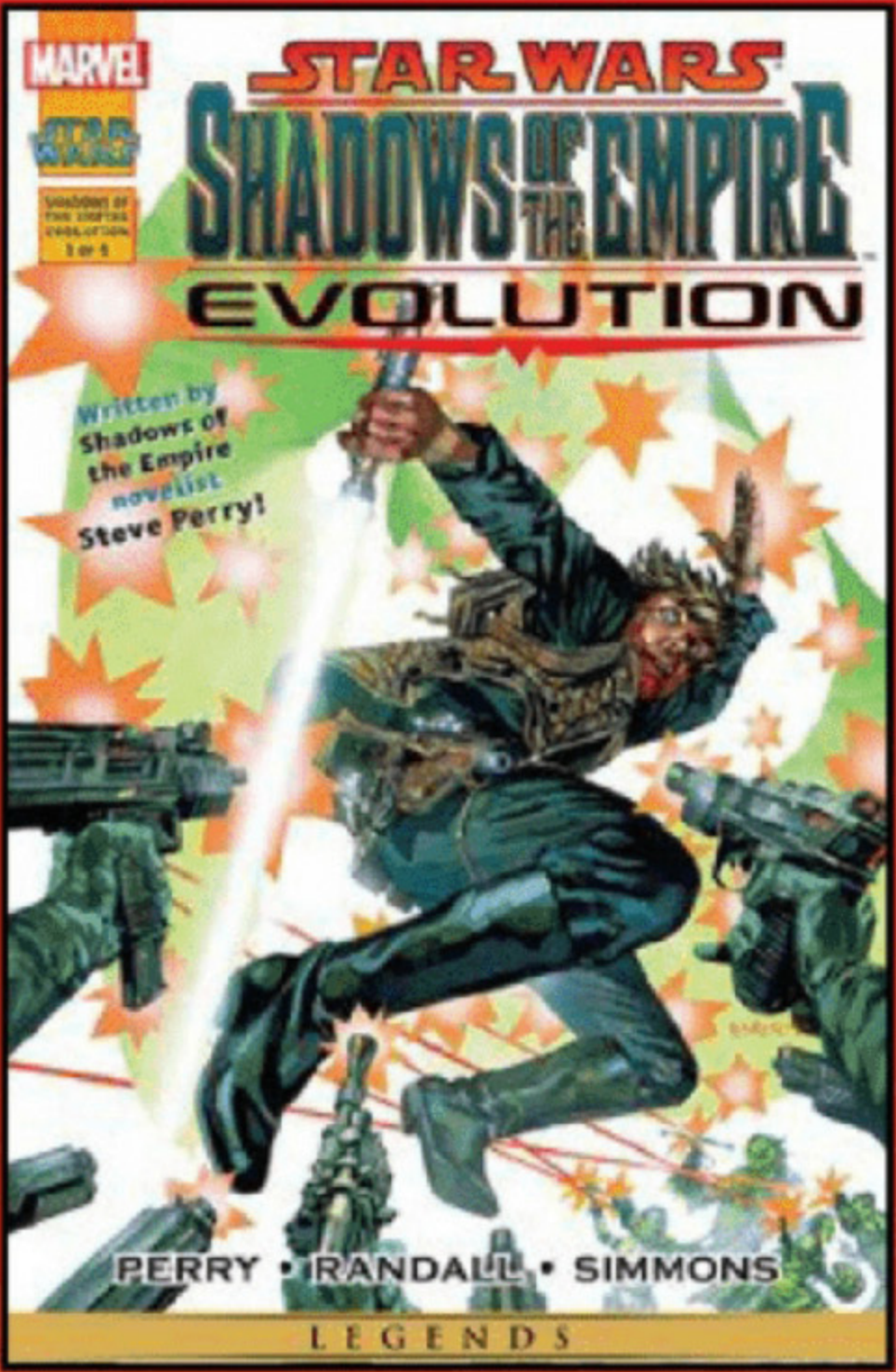


build the Death Star, he's pretty much the most dangerous person in the galaxy. At least from a certain point of view.

Leia and Chewie both disguise themselves as bounty hunters as part of a plot to investigate Xizor. It goes wrong. There are several impressive space battles and a fairly gross scene in which Xizor attempts to seduce Leia. Xizor is eventually defeated and Vader avoided, and the story ends with the rebels preparing for the events of *Return of the Jedi*. If all that sounds convoluted, don't forget that this was all meant to sell games and toys, so it was all led by the merchandise, not the other way round.

The cool tie-in stuff really did work, however. The video game, available on N64 and PC, was an early third-person shooter in which you took on the role of Dash Rendar. It begins at the Battle of Hoth and sees Dash





taking on wampas, stormtroopers, and AT-ATs in order to get to off-world in his ship, a modified YT-2400 called the Outrider. (Dash really is a '90s version of Han Solo; even his spaceship is basically the *Millennium Falcon* with bigger shoulder pads.) We then see Dash try to rescue Han Solo. You get to fight IG-88 and Boba Fett, and also mess up Fett's iconic Slave-1 spaceship. We then learn about Xizor's plot to kill Luke Skywalker and take on a swoop gang, which is basically an excuse to have a speeder bike race. The game ends with a thrilling battle in Prince Xizor's palace in order to save Leia, who's fallen into the Lizard Lord's clutches. Dash then fakes his own death for some reason, presumably to avoid having to be in *Return of the Jedi*. It's a fun game, with lots of different modes of action, and was ground-breaking for its time.

The toys are also something else. With *Star Wars* no longer the top dog on the

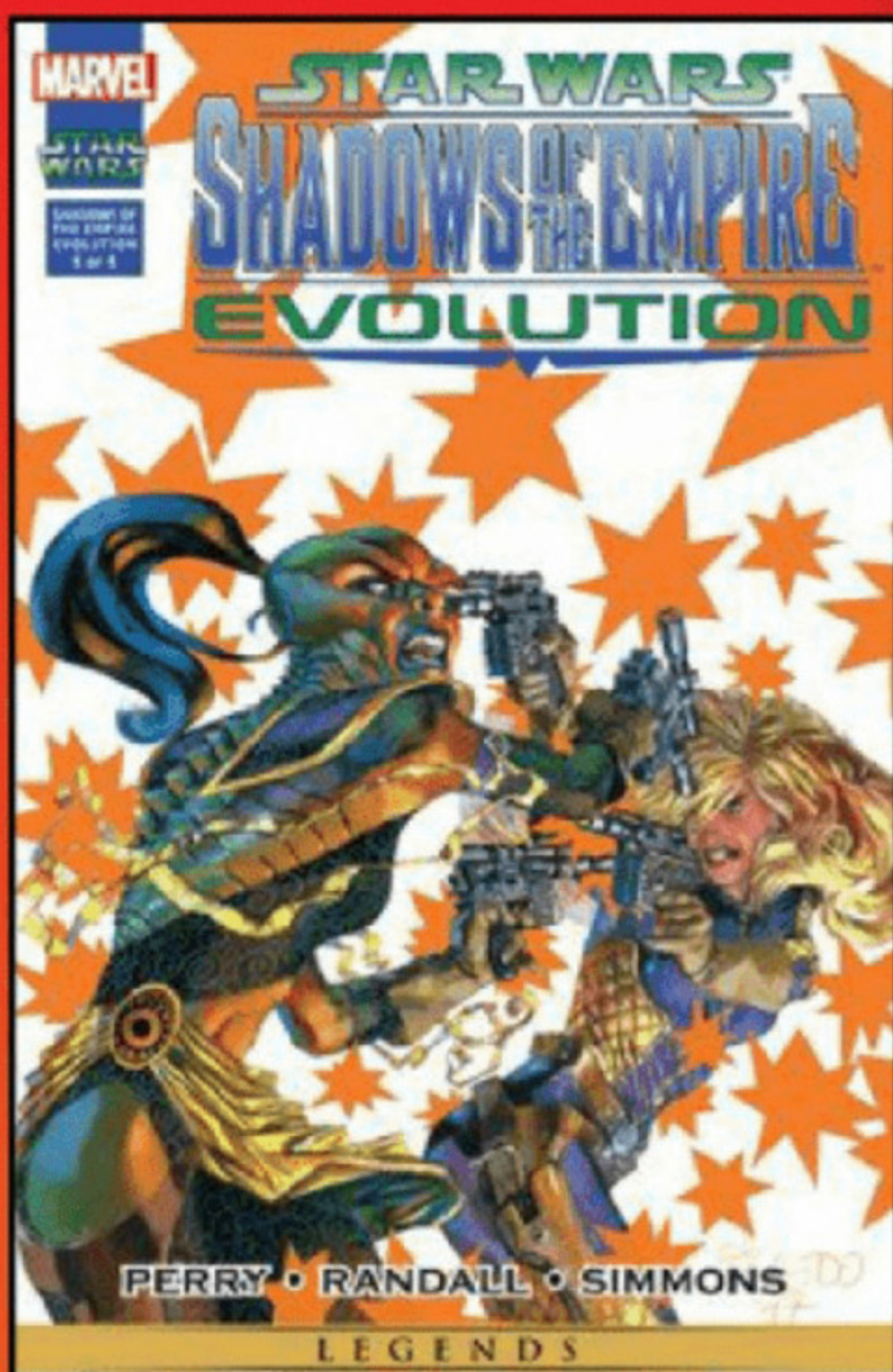
shelves of your local store, they had to be something special. They're somewhere between the old goofy '80s models and the more interesting pieces we get today. This is the range that gave us a version of Chewbacca disguised as the gritty bounty hunter Snoova. He's got a crew-cut hair style, an eye-patch, and body armour. Luke gets a stormtrooper-style costume. Leia is in a less subtle version of the Boushh disguise and the Dash Rendar figure has shoulders so wide that you can probably serve drinks on him. Xizor came equipped with a huge translucent blue fan and a facial expression that told you that something smelled pretty bad.

The vehicles for this range are fun, too. We get a Slave-1 with an appropriately frozen-in-carbonite Han Solo and a more rugged paint-job, and it's quite a robust toy, despite its delicate design. The range also gave us The Outrider, Dash's ship. It's not as intricate

as other *Star Wars* toys from the time, it's an example of how the toy design clearly influenced the rest of the media; it's a good toy first and an interesting spaceship second. Finally, we got a Swoop bike and gangster. It's basically a heavier looking speeder bike with a more garish design. A fourth model, Xizor's personal spaceship, the Virago, was planned but never made production; prototypes are highly sought after. It's a real shame because the Virago looks like a deadly cross between a TIE-Fighter and a butterfly.

We did see more vehicles in the tie-in Micro Machines range, but they're pretty forgettable. We, of course, got a book for the roleplaying game (which was a massive hit at the time) and they even produced a 'Making Of' style book, with lots of designs for the toys and comics. There was also some trading cards. The only thing we didn't get was cereal. Or an actual film.





Of course, these days *Shadows of the Empire* is officially part of the *Star Wars Legends* canon, which means that Disney can pretty much ignore it. Some of the elements have already been overwritten, such as the origins of Leia's disguise in *Jedi*. Other elements still persist - Xizor's crime syndicate, The Black Sun, has been mentioned various times, and the YT-2400 Freighter has also featured in a few of the new books. No sign of Dash Rendar as yet (except as an off-hand comment in one of the *Solo* spin-offs), but given how much Disney love to recycle the old material, surely it's just a matter of time. Its real legacy is that it paved the way for the marketing juggernaut to come.

SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE is currently out of print, though readily available via Kindle. Likewise, the Dark Horse comic book series can be found on ComiXology.



CANON FODDER

Words: Kris Heys

Though SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE may now only be the stuff of LEGENDS, there's plenty of new EMPIRE STRIKES BACK-adjacent canonical curios out there to enjoy! Read on for a selection of our favourites....

✦ In one of *Empire*'s many abandoned scenes, wampas broke into the rebel base on Hoth. Using the scrapped idea as inspiration, *Forces of Destiny* episode *Beasts of Echo Base* sees Leia rescue Chewbacca from a 'very' hairy situation when one of them appears to take an unfortunate liking to the Wookiee. The fear in Chewie's eyes is genuinely haunting.

✦ The hastily abandoned Echo Base proves to be an irresistible source of bounty for dodgy archaeologist Chelli Lona Aphra, who risks Imperial entanglement to pilfer a fork-nosed ice worm fossil in Marvel Comics' recently relaunched *Doctor Aphra* #1.

✦ It's difficult to gauge just how long Luke spends on Dagobah during *Empire*, but it's safe to assume his little green friend's lessons in the Force extended far beyond the screen-time allotted. *The Path Ahead* episode of *Forces of Destiny* returns us to that period in *TESB*'s narrative, fleshing out Luke's training with more wise words from Yoda and a perilous scramble through the treetops. Not only is this short noteworthy in that it gives us a better look at the impressive scale of Dagobah's terrain (something the budget of *TESB* never allowed), it also utilises Mark Hamill himself, who reprises his role as the burgeoning Jedi Knight from 38 years prior.

✦ To see even more of *Empire*'s Force-strong swamp planet, seek out *Voices*, the Season 6 episode of *The Clone Wars* in which Yoda is introduced to his future place of exile by the long-dead Qui-Gon Jinn. More than forty years later, Supreme Leader Snoke will also take a younger Kylo Ren on a tour of Dagobah in the Marvel Comics' *Age of Resistance* story entitled *Fail. Or Kill It.*, encouraging his apprentice to give the mystical Dark Side Cave a whirl for himself. It doesn't go well for Ren, nor does it go well for the ancient hollow, which he destroys in order to hide the truth of what happened within from his master.

✦ As Luke, their "last hope", leaves Dagobah behind to save his friends on Cloud City, Yoda's then-ambiguous line "no, there is another" is expanded upon in the 2017 anthology book *From a Certain Point of View*. Gary D. Schmidt's thought-provoking entry *There is Another* tells us that Yoda actually wished it was Leia that he would train, and not her 'reckless' brother he was saddled with in the film. No wonder he was a bit cranky.

✦ Sure, it was agonising for Luke to learn the ugly truth about his parentage high atop that Cloud City catwalk, but have you ever stopped to spare a thought for poor Vader? It must have taken a lot of guts to open up to his son like that. And to have his proposal not only denied, but refused with that much vigour the recipient would rather chuck themselves down a shaft? Well, that would bruise even the boldest of egos. This iconic scene opens Marvel's third volume of its consistently excellent *Darth Vader* title, but instead of experiencing it through the familiar perspective of our rebel hero, writer Greg Pak switches focus to the Dark Lord of the Sith, who watches silently, gutted, as his son plummets out of sight. That did not go the way that he thought.

✦ Meanwhile, Marvel's main *Star Wars* book is currently exploring what happened to Luke's lightsaber directly after his hand got lopped off during the aforementioned confrontation. Maz Kanata's "good question for another time" is finally being answered within its pages, and promises to be quite an important tale, especially as we've now just learnt that Vader and Luke weren't the only characters present during their Cloud City dual...





SPACE ODDITY

Words: Rachel Knightley

DOUG NAYLOR, co-creator of *RED DWARF* and member of the *STARBURST* Hall of Fame, receiving the honour at our festival in 2016, talks about the brand new ninety-minute episode and the history of the show...

S *TARBURST*: You've have had a long, incredible journey with *Red Dwarf*. When *The End* first aired in 1988, would you have been surprised by *The Promised Land* and how far the show has come?

Doug Naylor: [Laughs] I would be absolutely stunned! On all sorts of things. Personally, I always thought *Red Dwarf* was going to be a huge hit, I was always very confident about that. Maybe wrongly! But I was. And I thought it would do three series because, you know, that was what was considered to be a good run back then - and that would be it. But when I went on set and saw it for the first time, I really worried that it was going to look cheap and kind of put a lot of people off. And to be fair I think it did for quite a while. But then going forward to 2020 and

seeing this it's extraordinary. Not the difference, but the fact it's lasted so long. And also what we're able to do now that you just couldn't do in 1988. There's a whole sequence with Rimmer where he's turned black and white and that involves rotating each frame, twenty-five frames a second, throughout a real, considerable chunk of the thing and only huge budget movies could do that in the eighties. But now because of the technology, we can do it. It still involves an enormous amount of work, but we're able to do it.

And it's great that it visually acknowledges the journey you've been on through the stages of Rimmer, that although you're using the new technology you're acknowledging where you've come from.

Absolutely. I always wanted Rimmer to be black and white: he'd have been black and white from the beginning if it had been technically possible but of course it just wasn't. You'd have to shoot against a green screen and then drop him in and it would have been a logistical nightmare, just absolutely no chance. So it's a sort of dream fulfilled that I've finally got him into black and white!

What comes first in writing an episode, the concepts you want to explore or the characters? Is it very different now to when you were co-writing?

Fewer people in the room so that process is different, of course! And obviously things get harder the more shows you do because you cherry-pick

the most obvious ideas to start with and which you can't truly do again. So ideas, obviously, are more difficult.

Is any aspect of that freeing though, being god of the universe rather than a gestalt entity?

Oh yes, absolutely, I mean I adore working with myself! I can write what I want to, and I like most - not all, but most - of my ideas and so that helps enormously. Kryten, for example; there was a summer of arguing, trying to get Kryten into the show. Rob [Grant, co-creator] didn't want Kryten at all and I thought we absolutely needed another character. I took it on board that a robot in a science fiction series would maybe be considered a cliché but it depended what we do with him. We had David Ross in for a show in the second series so we knew it was funny, with that sort of input into the chemistry of the show. I thought would make the show better. But anyway Rob agreed eventually and we got Kryten in but, of course, we couldn't get David Ross and ended up with Rob [Llewellyn].

And we're all very happy - with no offence to David Ross - that you did!
Absolutely, yes.

Something we found really quite beautiful this time around was the moments of the identity story for the Cat when he said "This is my home". The balance of humour with the really deep emotional level, the way you marry that with the scientific level...

Yeah. That's what's really exciting for me personally having the ninety-minute stories. Because you've got to give all four of them good parts, because otherwise you'll lose them. And in thirty minutes, there's a limit to what you can

do. So I'm really excited by this ninety-minute format as we are able to do those things. It would have to have been an entirely cat-based story if it had been thirty minutes so it's exciting to explore.

It's wonderful how far each character can go while still being within the character parameters that you've had for all this time.

Well, that's one of the rules about sitcoms and comedy characters: they've got to remain flawed in the way they always are. They don't change that much. But then something's got to happen or else you're just doing the same old jokes over and over and over. I think that's the joy of science fiction, that you're able to take ideas like that and use them and you couldn't do that in a traditional sitcom. People are very fond of saying "Oh, *Red Dwarf* is *Steptoe and Son* in space," and it absolutely isn't. I can't say how much I disagree with that analysis of it. You can do all sorts of things with sci-fi tropes to look at characters from unusual angles that you can't possibly do outside a hallucination or dream in a traditional sitcom. It was based on a radio show Rob and I did called *Son of Cliché* and a sketch called *Dave Hollins: Space Cadet*, which was a little bit of parody of *Alien* where the entire crew have been wiped out apart from one survivor and his computer. We did four or five of these sketches in *Son of Cliché* and then when we came down to 'right, we want to write a sitcom for TV' this was, what we considered at the time, our big one, the one we thought would be great to develop. And so we started off with the last human and one computer, and asked ourselves, "why is he the last human?" Something must have happened to the crew to have got killed. We were





very keen not to have aliens because all science fictions series had aliens so it was sort of back-engineered: okay, computers are generally brilliant, let's make ours not brilliant; let's make it senile in some sort of way. And then it was "how can we kill the crew?" and out of that evolved the idea of having a character who was a hologram. So to preserve the idea that we've just got one human, we had a hologram and then the idea came about that if Lister smuggled a cat on board he could evolve into something, a feline type humanoid. That would give us an unusual cast, now let's go and write that explanation into the pilot show - and that's what we did!

Were you always curious to come back to the cat race?

Well, so many people had asked about it! And we'd not done it before because

if it was just going to be a lot of people behaving like our Cat then that's not going to do very much. But when I got the idea of "Let's do feral cats who've taken over their society" and "what would that mean?" and out of that evolved the idea of Lister being a god and out of that evolved the idea of Rimmer also being a sort of god: I thought, actually there's some parallels there and we might get some interesting things out of that. Then we started to develop it, talking a lot to Richard Naylor who's the producer as well. He had a lot of great insights

It's great that all these years later that storyline from the first episode kept all its promises...

[Laughs] Promised Land, yeah, there you go. Well I hope it delivers - that the fans think it delivers.

What's next for you and Red Dwarf? Will you stick with the ninety-minute episodes?

I would love to stick with the ninety-minute episodes. I think it's really exciting. Having said that, when UKTV - because it was UKTV's idea - suggested we do a special, there was a bit of to-ing and fro-ing with Richard asking in what way would it be special; we'll need more money if it's going to be special! And they went away and came back and said okay, we get what you're saying, we can't just do a long episode of a sitcom, it's got to be different. But there was real trepidation of "why are we fixing things when they ain't broke?", "why are we changing the format of the show we and fans clearly liked and want more of after Series 11 and 12?" Long story short, we went that route and it was a logistical nightmare in terms of "how do you shoot ninety minutes in front of



audiences?" because you can't possibly shoot that in two nights. But *Red Dwarf* has been generally 50% in front of the audience and 50% played in to that audience, so you can get their laughter on it. So then we looked at that and Richard figured out a way of how that could be possible while also being very cognisant of the fact that the cast are not as young as they once were and there's a limit to how much they can perform live on every single evening and have any chance of remembering their lines with the very small amount of rehearsal time the schedule allowed.

We really wouldn't know! And while we realise some of that was Rimmer's wig and changing the angles of the faces, they've done well, haven't they? Or you have with them?

They have, yes! Lots of great make-up, great wigs!

And having Norman Lovett back seems like a real homecoming.

Yeah, I know. He should never have left. But hey-ho.

So you're a proud god of your universe?
[Laughs] I'm just a slave to the fans. The fans are the gods, not me.

Can we ask if the organisation still have Mr Flibble? Did he survive?

Oh! Yeah, that's a good question! There's a lot of things that have disappeared left, right and centre. I'm not sure where Mr Flibble is. I know we cleared out a storeroom and I was allowed to take some of it but whether Mr Flibble is in a box somewhere, I'm not quite sure.

We were fascinated that he'd come from a charity shop; that somewhere out there is someone who'd be very surprised to know how famous their penguin got!

Is that true? I didn't know he'd come from a charity shop! Probably a lot of our props and clothes come from charity shops to be fair. I always just say "Oh my God, that's an amazing job! How did you do that so quickly?"

What are you most proud of about *The Promised Land*?

That we managed to make it at all! With all the problems of Craig's schedule - he was turning on Morecambe Lights on the Sunday night and getting back to Pinewood at five in the morning - Danny doing a stand-up tour, Robert being ill for the vast majority of it, it was just so tough and, of course, when you watch it I don't think you have any sense of that at all so that makes me - not just me but the entire production team - extremely proud, because we had to work very hard. I think it was nine-day shoot and we hadn't had the four of them together for more than half a day.

You're a brave man!

Well, I didn't choose that let me tell you! Circumstances forced that on us but anyway, yeah, that's probably what I'm most proud of. It got made!

RED DWARF: THE PROMISED LAND is out now on DVD and Blu-ray.





NO GUTS NO FURY

by Ed Fortune

With AGENTS OF S.H.I.E.L.D. entering its final season, we prepare to say goodbye with a look back over its six years in the line of duty...



Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. has always been something of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's weird relative. Launched on the back of the MCU's Phase One and featuring Clark Gregg as his iconic *Avengers Assemble* character Phil Coulson, Season 7 will be the last instalment of the long-running show, finally putting to rest what has been a lengthy and rather unexpected journey for fans. What better time to kick back and remind ourselves where the story has taken us so far! (We'll tread lightly around some of the juicier revelations, so if you're planning on starting the show from Season 1, there will be still plenty to surprise you!)

It's been a pretty weird ride so far. Season 1 was, at best, a little bit iffy. Though

S.H.I.E.L.D. is a long-established part of Marvel comics, the first few episodes struggled to capture the 'leather and bottled air' super-spy vibe of the source material, leaning a little too hard on the movies to lend itself some credibility. But as it gathered momentum, it became rather awesome. It started off gently; the odd reference to *Thor: The Dark World* and a guest star or two. In the early seasons, they were more keen to pull audiences in with movie tie-in gimmicks, and more able to do so.

This meant that thing that happened in the movies affected the show's plot. Back in 2014, it was entirely possible that you could go see *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and then turn on the TV to discover that the events you just saw had twisted the plot of the TV show.

The show took the return of Phil Coulson pretty seriously, devoting an entire plot arc to exactly how he came back from the dead. This would not only tie-in with later shows, but also movies such as *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Captain Marvel*. The show also delivered by being a little bit sneaky with Marvel canon. Killer cyborg Deathlok is a pretty obscure hero, though memorable if you've ever seen the striking character design in the pages of the *Marvel Handbook*. The show's version of the character was steady and nuanced, turning a throwaway character from the comics into a three dimensional hero.

Of course, some of this was by accident rather than design. *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* began as a Joss Whedon project and it has traces of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* all the way through its design, especially when it comes to the story arcs of individual characters. One of the big things about *Buffy* was that no individual hero was safe from harm or change, and this is also true with *S.H.I.E.L.D.* Whedon's departure from all things related to the MCU, combined with Disney buying the franchise (and having its own ideas for TV) meant that the show was on the bottom rung when it came to Marvel. Despite all this, it did very well in becoming an invaluable addition to the MCU canon.

That said, Season 2 suffered from the crossover blues a little too much. Tie-ins with '50s era spin-off show *Agent Carter* were welcome but stretched the storyline a little thin in places. Much of the plot of this season was dealt with coping with S.H.I.E.L.D.'s infiltration by sinister terrorist cell HYDRA. Though this was a direct result of events from the movies, it freed up some of the storyline so it could return to its spy-fi roots. Alas, further tie-ins to *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and an insistence on establishing *The Inhumans* weighed the plot down somewhat. The planned *Inhumans* movie never happened and let's not discuss the mediocre TV spin-off. (Except to say that their version of teleporting dog Lockjaw was the bestest boy ever. Yes he was.) This season did give us a lovely reveal, though: that one of the established characters, Skye, was also called Daisy. This, and her background, tied her directly to even more obscure Marvel Comics canon, but it was done so well that casual viewers enjoyed the reveal while hardcore fanboys got to delight in their hoarding of obscure knowledge.

By Season 3, we'd hit our stride. In a well-established trope of the show, super-scientist lovers Fitz and Simmons were yet again separated, this time Simmons being stranded on a distant world. This led to the standout episode *4,722 Hours*, a dramatic departure in style and tone, and one that showed the producers were happy to take risks with the format. It's also the first series where the show found its feet, ceasing to really be a mere extension of the MCU, but at the same time staying truly Marvel-themed. References to a larger world stayed (and the attention to detail remained strong), but there was less screen time messing around with story arcs and plots that didn't really go anywhere. Instead we got a cool 'secret origin' for Hydra and the introduction of the supervillain Hive, a character that was pretty dumb in the comics but was now a genuine threat in the show. It also gave the producers an excuse to do more with the character of Grant Ward. The introduction





of cosmic-horror was a nice bit of foreshadowing for future series.

By Season 4, it's safe to say that the relationship with the rest of the MCU was somewhat distant, the show working as a perfect add-on to the MCU experience but a wholly unnecessary and ever so slightly confusing one. Season 4 was split into three distinct storylines. Our first sequence was called *Ghost Rider*, which was the first real journey into the mystic side of things for our Agents (with *Doctor Strange* coming out in the same year, it was clearly time to add a bit of magic to the mix). Alas, this was not the Nic Cage version of Ghost Rider. Instead, we got Robbie Reyes, the car-driving iteration who is a much more vengeance-focused character. Despite not being quite what the fans expected, we got some great moments, including a chase scene between the iconic cherry red 'flying car' Lola and the jet black Ghost Rider car. As cool street thugs who can transform into chain-wielding demonic-looking dudes with a flaming skull for a head go, he did pretty well. That and we got a whole plot involving magic doom tome, the Darkhold. Another shout-out to the fans was a new Agent in the form of Jeffrey Mace, AKA the Patriot. A pound shop Captain America who really fitted in with the vibe and feel of the show.

Still reeling from the Ghost Rider plot, *S.H.I.E.L.D.* then gave us a whole story about killer androids, based on the comic book creatures known as Life Model Decoys. These were the ultimate 'fake out' characters in the comics, allowing Marvel to kill off a hero and then claim it was a Life Model Decoy in the next issue. The TV show's version was more sinister and much more alluring, though again hampered by the Inhuman subplot that went nowhere and added nothing to the show. The third sequence was the excellent



Agents of Hydra, a carefully thought-out and clever 'What If' style scenario that utterly detached itself from the baggage of previous series and yet still kept all the characters and themes throughout. It's a weird storyline and somehow acts as a welcome departure and total shift in tone, while still rewarding the viewer for continuing to watch.

Season 5 went into similarly new territory, by being mostly set in the future. Oh, and Earth is pretty much gone and the Kree (the blue aliens last seen in every other Marvel movie) now control humanity, using them as fodder and occasionally enslaving or keeping as pets any who exhibit super powers. The performances at this point are superb, with the entire crew seemingly able to take on all acting challenges and shift role at the drop of a hat. The show has come a long way, in every possible direction. Though still recognisable as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, Season 5 is the bizarre post-apocalyptic

space opera that no one knew they wanted until it happened.

Season 6 is all that and a bag of chips. Now set back in the current timeline, the crew are happy to jump into space or go dimension hopping. The big bad of the last season is a little lame and one of the central mysteries is rather transparent. Still, it ties up a lot of the lore of the previous episodes into a neat little bow and almost convinces the viewer that there was a master plan to all this.

So, what should we expect with Season 7? Well, we only have thirteen episodes, but a lot of the series' big moments have happened already. The season ended on a time-travelling, reality-twisting alien invasion and apparently that means we're going to begin with the Agents all stuck in 1931, trying to prevent S.H.I.E.L.D. from being erased from history. There are strong rumours that we'll see Hayley Atwell reprise her role as Peggy

Carter for some time-jumping shenanigans and the same sources seem to think that cameos from other MCU actors are likely; this is, after all, the last shout.

The truth is, this is *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*. It has an excellent and solidly experienced cast who are willing to take on pretty much any challenge. We have a storyline that can go anywhere and do anything. The only limit seems to be Marvel's unwillingness to dip it fully into the MCU. That said, given how well the show has handled the most obscure bits of Marvel superhero lore, expect something familiar but also incredibly new. It's a show that will be sorely missed when it's gone, doing for the superhero genre what *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* did for mainstream horror TV shows.

Season 7 of AGENTS OF S.H.I.E.L.D. is currently airing in the States, with a UK launch on E4 coming soon.



THE MYSTERIOUS MARTIN UNSWORTH LOOKS BACK AT A GRUELLING NIGHTMARE OF A FILM THAT YOU MAY HAVE OVERLOOKED...

HORROR OBSCURA

JUST A NUMBERS GUY



In 2012, WWE Studios added to their considerable output with a twisted, brutal, action-packed, gore-soaked thriller in which nothing is as it seems and a palpable tension is felt from the first scene. *No One Lives* was directed by Ryûhei Kitamura, who had previously helmed *Godzilla: Final Wars* (2004) and the Vinnie Jones-headlined *The Midnight Meat Train* (2008), which was based on a short story by Clive Barker. Firstly, we must warn you that we can't discuss the film without revealing some spoilers, but we'll be sure to keep some visceral surprises for you to enjoy when you check it out.

Then-on-the-rise leading man Luke Evans plays an enigmatic, unnamed man (referred to only as Driver outside of the film's world), driving across country with his girlfriend Betty (Laura Ramsey). Stopping at a rundown motel for the night, everything seems alright between them. They watch TV reports of a missing heiress and make love. There's an atmosphere between them later though, when it's inferred that he's seeing someone else. Things get even tenser when they go for a bite to eat and attract the attention of the local 'bad boy gang'. Their leader, Hoag (Lee Tergesen) wants to keep a low profile ("Don't shit where I eat!") but the impetuous Flynn (Derek Magyar) wants to score some thrills since their earlier house raid was aborted when the owners returned home unexpectedly, causing Flynn to get trigger happy and kill them. Flynn sidles up to the pair and attempts to intimidate them. The girl seems more concerned with the antagonist's safety than her own, giving glances to her stone cold partner. Hoag's protection of the scene doesn't last long, as when they are back out on the road, they are ambushed by Flynn, who takes them back to their ranch in the hope of getting their account numbers. Hoag's brother Ethan (WWE wrestler Brodus Clay) assumes his imposing figure and enormous hunting knife is enough to get what they need. What they don't count on is the man with no name is a force to be reckoned with and has no fear and is more than resourceful enough to deal with an in-fighting group of criminals who think they're indestructible. They don't realise they have

gotten themselves involved with a human Terminator; a psychopath so driven that he won't stop until... well, you know the name of the film, right? To let you into that much isn't a massive spoiler since the promotional art depicts Evans brandishing weapons and covered in blood. However, Evans' Driver isn't the stereotypical psycho, he's motivated by love - a terribly skewed version, admittedly - and his obsession and possessiveness towards his 'romantic' interest is what guides his (lack of) moral compass.

At one point, Evans' character says *"I must admit, I did not see that coming"*, and it's something that could easily be repeated by the viewer throughout the rollercoaster 90-minute running time. *No One Lives* is shot brilliantly, with moments of dazzling cinematography that brings to mind the early work of Dario Argento and has several nods to Quentin Tarantino. The practical effects are suitably grisly and stomach-churning, rivalling the best, most graphic horror output.

At the time of the original release, STARBURST spoke to a couple of actors involved in *No One Lives*. Derek Magyar, who so effectively plays the renegade member of the gang, Flynn has a great take on the scenario: *"What was so interesting to me, is it's a story that in the end is about evil versus evil, and when we are put in that situation who do we root for? What side of yourself do you find yourself gripping to? I thought that was amazing for the audience."* It's very true; they are all bad guys. Even the one person you feel sorry for has a streak of nastiness. Magyar's character is particularly nasty. He has an over-inflated sense of himself and a callousness to other people. *"For me, Flynn is a character that couldn't be further away from who I am,"* Magyar told us. *"I tried to find one piece of the character I could tap into, and from there I just let it go and let myself unfold within the character. So I certainly let go of a lot of pent up aggression and anger from who knows where in my life."* That was something that was hard for the actor to deal with, *"I definitely went deep into it. It was a long shoot and it was tough to wrap and put the mask back on the next day."*

Being a WWE Studios production, one would expect some actors from the roster of wrestlers. Here, there is only one - Brodus Clay, whose real name is the less threatening George Murdoch, or Tyrus as he is now known. A behemoth of a man, he came on board following a bust up in the ring left him needing staples and being on the shelf for a few weeks. *"He's loyal to a fault but not very smart, unfortunately, and not a tremendously gifted fighter either."* Clay told us of his cinematic character. *"Then he's face to face with Luke Evans' character, who is quite possibly the most sadistic human being on the face of the planet. So even though I play a very tough mean man, I'm at the absolute worst spot for being faced with a psychopath."* We see the results of his encounter in graphic detail, which includes an ingenious use for handcuffs. *"I hadn't seen it until I actually saw it in the movie theatre,"* he revealed *"I didn't realise how badly I had been murdered until I saw it."* He was pleased with the gory payoff for his character, which provides one of the most resourceful and bizarre moments of the film. *"If you're going to go out, go out big."* Clay jovially recounted, *"I think I was the first male caesarean birth in a movie and I'm very proud that I gave birth to a 5' 10", 135lb English male. I mean, that's not an easy task to accomplish."* It needs to be seen to be believed.

Luke Evans, of course, went on to bigger things thanks to his addition to the *Fast and Furious* ensemble from the sixth instalment. Going into the production, he apparently read up on psychopaths and managed to get into the mind-set extremely well, worryingly. As he pointed out at the time, it's difficult not to scream at someone while you're killing them, but that's not what a psychopath would do, and Evans pulls off that demeanour spectacularly.

Although it may follow some of the same beats, *No One Lives* is a slasher movie like no other. Once seen, it'll never be forgotten, just avoid the trailer first!

You can catch *NO ONE LIVES* on Horror Channel on July 11th. Sky 317, Virgin 149, Freeview 70, Freesat 138.



BEDROCK MEMORIES

BY
ALAN
BOON

Join us as we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of one the most enduring and endearing cartoons of all time - **THE FLINTSTONES**...



N September 1960, America's television-watching public sat down for an evening in front of the box and was presented with a new proposition. Okay, network TV was only a dozen years old by that point, and pretty much everything was a unique proposition, but this was a *cartoon*. In *prime time*! Airing at 8.30pm EST, the show became a massive hit with audiences, although critics labelled it 'a pen and ink disaster'. *The Flintstones* had arrived.

From the famed Hanna-Barbera studio, *The Flintstones* was the third series produced by the duo after they struck out on their own. William Hanna and Joseph Barbera had met while working for Rudolf Ising at Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, where they produced an animated theatrical short about a cat called Jasper and an unnamed mouse, which became a backdoor pilot for the long-running *Tom and Jerry* series of cartoons. Over the next twenty years, Hanna and Barbera directed *Tom and Jerry* shorts that won the Academy Award for Best Short Subject (cartoons), although the awards were given to series producer Fred Quimby. They also worked on animated sequences for the Gene Kelly picture *Anchors Aweigh!* as well as dozens of other projects, and when Quimby retired in 1955, the duo took over his role as heads of MGM's animated division. The emergence of TV prompted MGM to close the studio in 1957, and Hanna and Barbera tried to sell their idea for a show about a cat and a dog to various

studios, without success. Columbia Pictures eventually decided to take a gamble on the pair, with its owner Harry Cohn taking a stake in their new company, named H-B Enterprises after Hanna won a coin toss to have his name listed first.

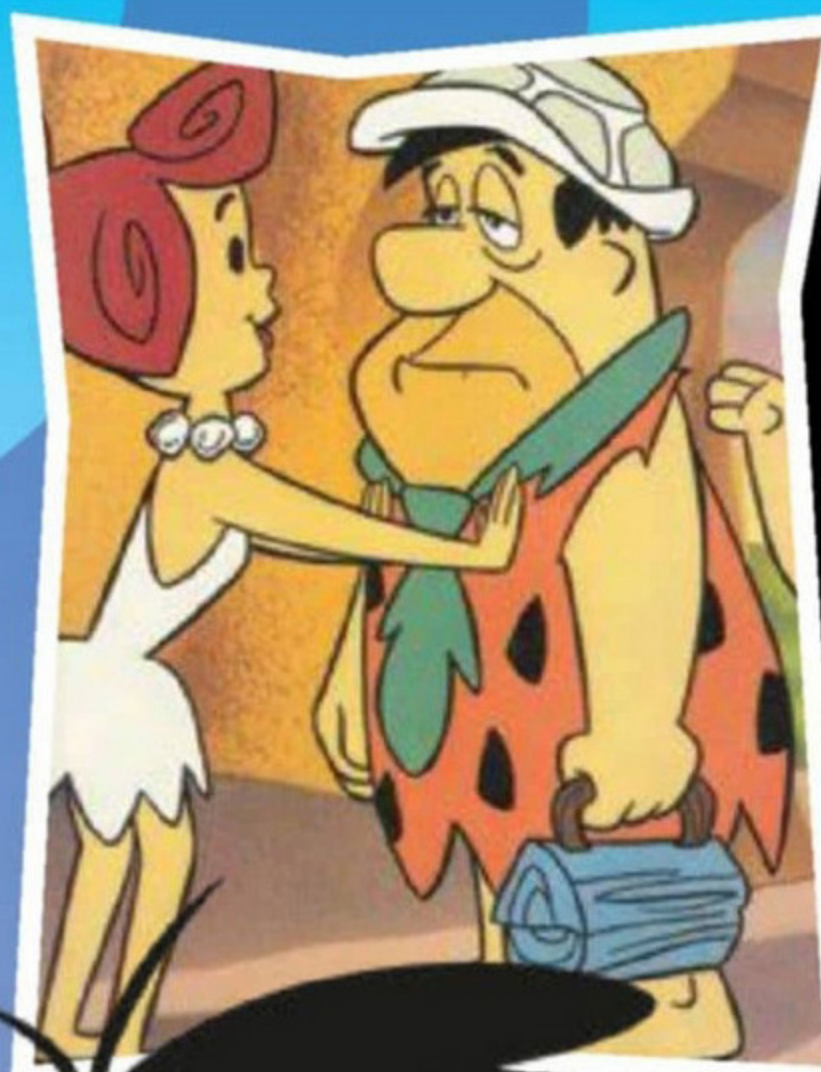
That cat and dog story, now titled *The Ruff and Reddy Show*, aired as part of NBC's Saturday morning children's block in December 1957 and was joined the following year by *The Huckleberry Hound Show*, which not only introduced the eponymous Southern gentledog, but also mischievous mice Pixie and Dixie, scheming lupus Hokey Wolf, and a bothersome bear by the name of Yogi. The success of *The Huckleberry Hound Show* (in 1960 it became the first animated show to win an Emmy Award, taking Outstanding Achievement in the Field of Children's Programming) led to *The Quick Draw McGraw Show*, and although these shows were massive hits with kids, Hanna-Barbera Enterprises (as the company was now known) wanted to create something that appealed across generations, as *Tom and Jerry* had before.

Struck by the idea to create an animated sitcom, the duo tested various concepts, including hillbillies (it's impossible now to understand the appeal of hillbillies to the post-war American audience), Romans, pilgrims, and even Native Americans. None of them stuck, but a sketch by staff animator Don Gordon of two cavemen listening to a record player with a bird for its needle sparked the inspiration for a Stone Age setting, which was given the working title

The Flagstones. The initial test offering featured Fred Flagstone, his wife Wilma, and their son Fred Jr, and Hanna-Barbera hawked it around sponsors, trying to secure the backing for their new show. Many companies were unwilling to take a risk on the new venture until Joseph Barbera landed at fledgeling studio ABC, who bought the show immediately.

Once it had gone into production, the show changed its name to *The Flintstones*, and Fred Jr was erased, with the premise now involving two neighbouring couples, Fred and Wilma Flintstone, and Barney and Betty Rubble. Only Jean Vander Pyl from the original voice cast, as Wilma, was retained, and a vital component of the show was the banter between Fred and his wife. By coincidence (or not?), one of the only TV shows William Hanna enjoyed watching was a repeat run of *The Honeymooners*, the 1955-56 sitcom developed by and starring Jackie Gleason, based on sketches he'd presented as part of *The Jackie Gleason Show*. Featuring Ralph and Alice Kramden, and their neighbours Ed and Trixie Norton, it was an attempt to do a humorous but gritty sitcom about two working-class couples. *The Honeymooners* was an immediate hit but fell away in the ratings, and was cancelled after only thirty-nine episodes, with Gleason citing a lack of new ideas as the prime reason. It gained a new life in re-runs, airing alongside a new run of *The Jackie Gleason Show* and the similarity between the show and *The Flintstones* did not go unnoticed.





Hanna admitted that Gleason's sitcom was an influence on *The Flintstones* but Joseph Barbera, perhaps mindful of a possible lawsuit, dismissed the claims but added he was grateful that people considered the two shows on the same footing. As it turned out, Gleason *did* consider suing Hanna-Barbera over the similarities between the shows but decided against it, not wanting to be known as 'the guy who yanked Fred Flintstone off the air'. That's because *The Flintstones* was a massive hit for ABC, the eighteenth most-watched show of the 1960-61 season. Ratings remained steady for a second season. Surprising to look back on now, both seasons were sponsored by Winston cigarettes, with Fred and Wilma starring in adverts for the brand. In 1961, the show was nominated for the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Comedy Series, the first animated show to be considered, but lost out to *The Jack Benny Show*.

Joining Jean Vander Pyl in the voice cast for the series once it launched were Alan Reed, Mel Blanc, and Bea Benaderet as Fred, Barney, and Betty. Reed resembled Fred Flintstone in real life, and came up with the character's signature "Yabba dabba doo!" after the script simply called for a "yahoo!" Blanc was an industry legend, who had voiced Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck until the animated theatrical short business dried up and he made the transition to television. Such was Blanc's dedication to the role of Barney Rubble that he even recorded several episodes from his hospital bed while recovering from a car crash that left him in a body cast. Blanc also voiced the Flintstones' pet dinosaur, Dino.





By the third season of *The Flintstones*, even the critics who had once dismissed it as trash were firmly on board, and the creators decided it was time to shake things up. *The Flintstones* had been the first animated show to depict couples sharing the same bed, and went a step further when Wilma announced she was pregnant. Her pregnancy lasted for nine weekly episodes before the arrival of Pebbles, the Flintstones' baby daughter.

The initial treatment for the show had the family with a son, Fred Jr, but marketing executives insisted that it be a girl because girl's toys were much bigger sellers than boy's toys, and a doll of Pebbles was produced in 1964, which brought in \$20 million in its first year. The arrival of Pebbles also impacted on the Rubbles who, it was revealed, were unable to conceive naturally. This was a subject rarely touched upon on television, let alone in a family show, and yet another first for *The Flintstones*. In Season 4, the Rubbles adopted their own child, Bamm-Bamm (named for his favourite thing to do), and the core cast was complete.

The third season also saw the arrival of the famous 'Meet the Flintstones' theme tune, which was retroactively added to earlier episodes when they were repeated in syndication. Ratings remained solid for Seasons 3 and 4, with the show hovering around the thirtieth most-watched of the season, but dived for *The Flintstones'* fifth year, and showed no sign of recovery in its sixth. The decision was made to cancel the show after six seasons and 166 episodes, a year after Hanna-Barbera Enterprises had been bought by Taft Broadcasting. Hanna and Barbera both stayed under the new

ownership, and the studio enjoyed hits such as *Space Ghost*, *The Abbott and Costello Cartoon Show*, and *The Banana Splits* in the year following *The Flintstones'* cancellation.

The Man Called Flintstone, a theatrical movie cashing in on the success of the James Bond franchise, hit cinemas in August 1966, and there were sporadic returns for the characters in *The Pebbles and Bamm-Bamm Show* (which featured the kids as teenagers), *The Flintstone Comedy Hour*, *The New Fred and Barney Show*, *The Flintstone Kids*, and others in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as one-off specials that saw the families meet other animated characters such as the Schmoo and The Jetsons.

In 1991, Hanna-Barbera was bought by Ted Turner's TBS, and their output became the, ahem, bedrock of their new enterprise, Cartoon Network. Hanna and Barbera continued to work for the company until their deaths in 2007 and 2001 respectively and saw their most famous creations get the big-screen live-action treatment twice, in 1994 and 2000.

1994's *The Flintstones* starred a fitting John Goodman and Rick Moranis as Fred and Barney, with Elizabeth Perkins and Rosie O'Donnell less appropriate as their wives. It was directed by Brian Levant, who was brought in to deliver on a project that had been gestating for a decade and was a production of Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment. Spielberg had worked with Goodman on *Always* and bought the rights to *The Flintstones* primarily to cast Goodman in the lead role. Much like the original run of the cartoon, the movie was critically-panned but was a huge box office



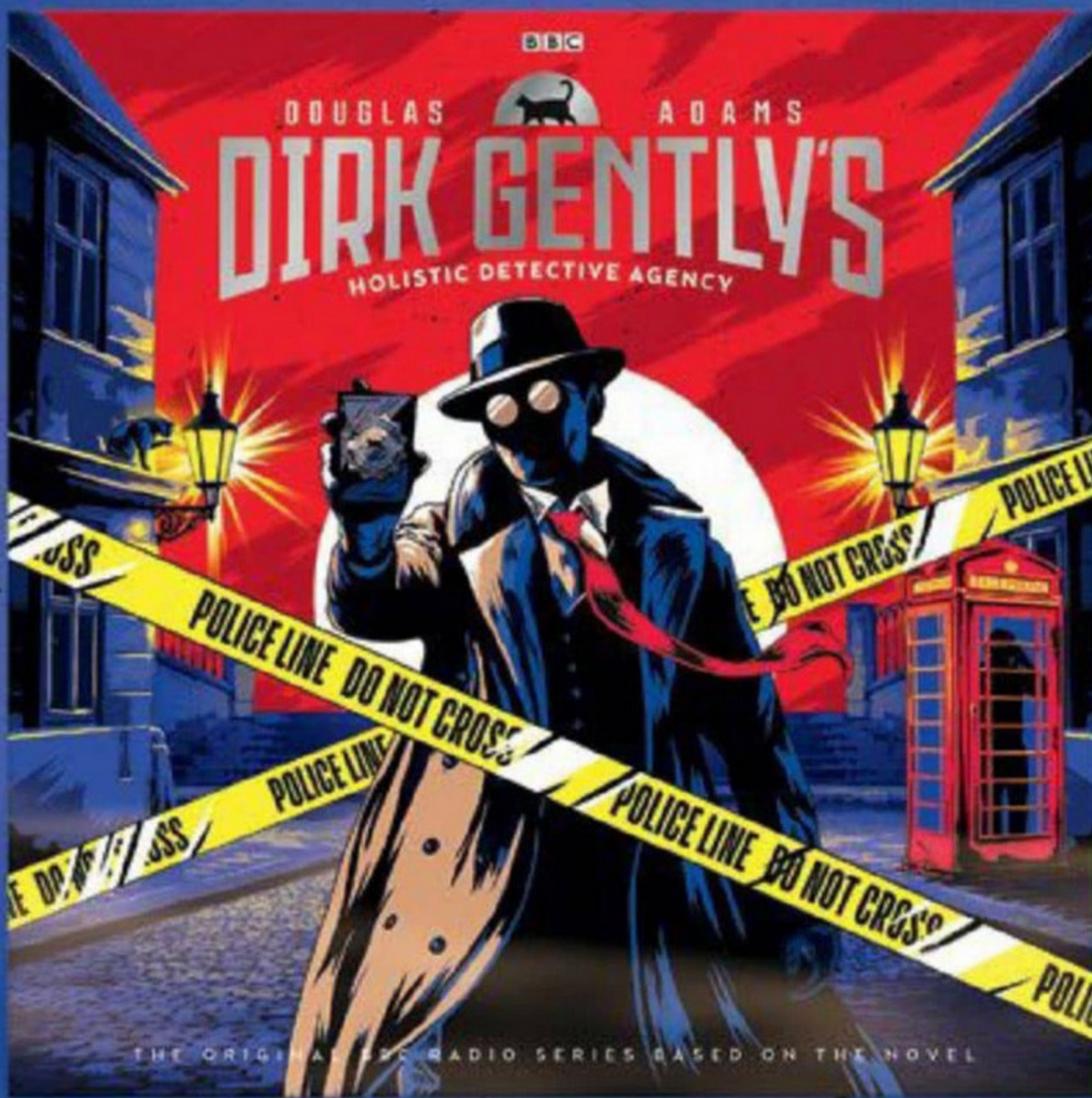
success, eventually earning seven times its budget of \$46 million. Joseph Barbera's opinion was that it was good but it "wasn't as good as I could have made it".

A prequel followed, in 2000, although none of the original cast reprised their roles for *The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas*, which told the story of how young bachelors Fred and Barney – played by Mark Addy and Stephen Baldwin – met their wives. Again, it was savaged by critics and this time the viewing public agreed, the box office take was just three-quarters of its \$85 million budget.

A revival of the television series from *Family Guy* creator Seth McFarlane was mooted in 2011, to air on Fox in 2013, but it came to nothing, as did plans for an animated movie produced by Will Ferrell, but a proposed adult-oriented reboot by Elizabeth Banks' Brownstone Productions is still in development, possibly for HBO Max.

Over the last sixty years, the adventures of a cartoon caveman and his family and friends, have featured on TV screens and in movie theatres, sold cereal, jam, and cigarettes, charted on the hit parade, and even inspired theme parks. Outlasting other similar Hanna-Barbera concepts like *The Jetsons*, *The Roman Holidays*, and *Wait 'Till Your Father Gets Home*, *The Flintstones* had no equal until the 1989 arrival of *The Simpsons*, which aired its 166th episode in spring 1997, and is nearing in on seven hundred episodes. There's something eternally pleasing about a portly family man, even more so than the inexplicable popularity of hillbillies, which is good news for Fred Flintstones everywhere. ✦





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BLAZING SASQUATCH

Words: John Townsend



With *THE ZOMBIE SURVIVAL GUIDE* and *WORLD WAR Z*, acclaimed author MAX BROOKS redefined the zombie genre, grounding the horror and desperation in haunting realism. Now he is doing the same for Sasquatch with his new novel *DEVOLUTION*. Max took some time out from his busy schedule to discuss his writing process, growing up in California and all things Bigfoot...

STARBURST: How did the initial idea for *Devolution* come about?

Max Brooks: The funny thing is all my writing is about survival. It could be a zombie pandemic, it could be being black in a white man's world, it could be waking up in a world made of blocks, or it could be giant ape creatures that see you as food for the winter. It's all about survival. The impetus for this came from the very scared little boy I used to be. My fear of Sasquatch predates my fear of zombies. My fear of zombies came at the dawn of adolescence, whereas my fear of Sasquatch came from the movies that just came on the TV without me asking for them.

Was that kind of exposure common in the United States throughout the '70s and '80s?

Yes, it was a very big deal. It was this thing about questioning everything: is astral projection real? And what about Atlantis and the Loch Ness Monster? It was this counterculture notion of long buried mysteries; are they true? I lay the blame for the Sasquatch craze on the UK because it came from the abominable snowman mystery, which came from you guys! You sent explorers out who coined this phrase 'abominable snowman' and it set off a huge press explosion in the UK. Not to be outdone, we had to have our own version and it became an ape-like creature lurking somewhere in the forests of North America.

In the novel, you do present ways that it could be real.

Gigantopithecus was real; at a point in history there was a giant ape. And there is no scientific reason for that ape not to exist. However, I will hold out judgement until I see some actual physical evidence that it does exist.

Do you have to get into a particular mindset then when writing to ensure authenticity?

Oh no, I don't pull anything out of my ass! Everything I do has to be based upon years of verifiable research. For every hour I spend writing I have to spend at least ten to a hundred hours learning. For *Devolution*, we're not just talking about reading stacks of books, which is no easy feat for a guy like me who is dyslexic. I had to interview experts in their fields about technology and science, and then I had to physically do what I wrote about. The weapons in the book, I made those. Because I had to see if they were possible. If you had nothing but a kitchen knife and some bamboo could you make a spear? I had to see if I could grow those seeds indoors with what they had to hand. And I went to Washington State to see where I set the book to see if my characters could've walked out of there.

It's clear, then, that you're not an organic writer but very structured and planned?

I'm a hugely planned guy because I don't trust my talent. There are writers, and I am very envious of them, who trust their innate ability to tell a good story. They just sit down and start writing from the subconscious.

Maybe they have an idea or sketch an outline, but they just go. And God bless them, I wish I could be like them. But a lifetime of dyslexia has forced me to plan everything.

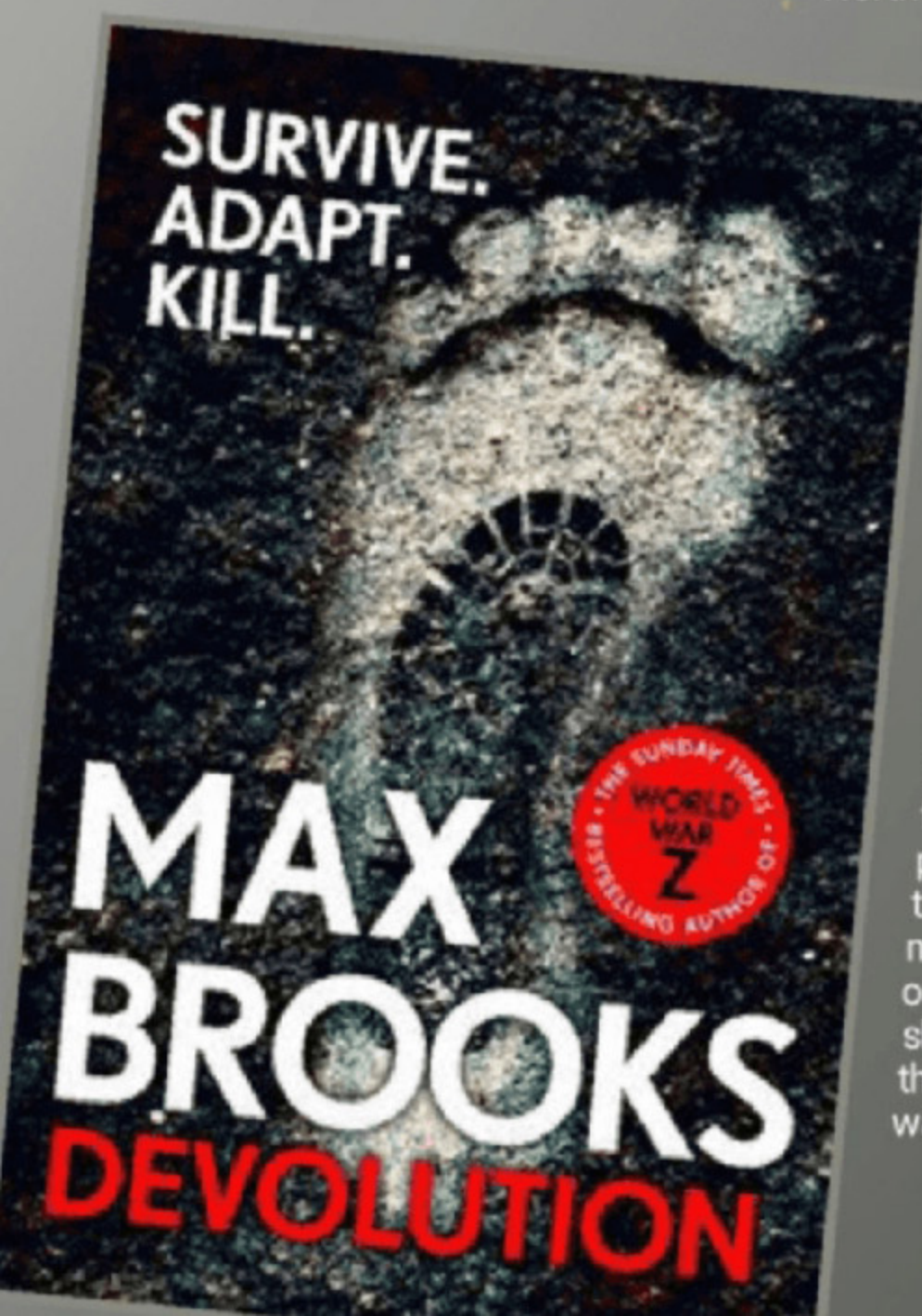
So, for you the actual writing is the last part of the process?

Absolutely. By the time I sit down at the blank page, I have years of research; I have outlines, I might even have a synopsis that could be half as long as the book. But by the time I do page one, I'm prepared - I also have to go through who knows how many drafts before I get it right.

Would this explain the time between your writing?

I actually sold this story as a movie not long after *World War Z* came out. They bought it and hired writers and a director and started the development process. But as things started to move some way from my initial idea, I wasn't too disappointed when it never went anywhere. Many years later, I asked for the novel rights back and that jumpstarted the process again if not the idea.

"The weapons in the book, I made those. Because I had to see if they were possible. If you had nothing but a kitchen knife and some bamboo could you make a spear?"



Your books always treat the subject matter as fact but your implication there is that the mystery was simply invented...

Certainly, with Sasquatch and the Yeti. There was a legitimate curiosity and there are people who believe there may well be an undiscovered species of great ape out there, or the prehistoric species of Gigantopithecus might still be around. I think there is a valid, a very earnest feeling among certain people. But with everything there are other people and newspapers who will jump on the bandwagon. The short answer is that I don't think it was invented, but it was exploited.

That's interesting because while *World War Z* is wholly uncinematic in its novel form, *Devolution* is the opposite... Yes, it is. It feels like a movie because that's how it started. But I'm glad that didn't happen because I've now had time to research and plan and this is now exactly how I wanted it to read.

The similarities with *World War Z* are in the style, it being a journal and interviews. What interests you about that format?

I think the threat inherently dictates the scope. *World War Z* came about because zombies are inherently a macro threat, a big, possibly global, threat. And I was getting sick and tired of seeing it told from the point of view of a small group. It gave me so many questions. It would be like if you tried to teach the scope of *World War II* by just watching *Saving Private Ryan*. I set out just to answer my own questions and it grew into a global novel and telling it through interviews seemed like the best way. *Devolution* is much smaller and more intimate because the nature of a Sasquatch attack is smaller.

You centre the story on this eco-community Greenloop. Is that how you see our future?

This is happening. There are these communities out there. Greenloop is based upon a real place. The Pacific Northwest has these groups of over-educated urbanites who want to get back to nature but have absolutely no idea what that means. And a lot of this is based upon the story of Timothy Treadwell. This was a guy from Venice Beach, California who

had spent his whole life in the city. He took it upon himself to save the Alaskan brown bear. Every summer, he would pack up and wander around protected lands, chum it up with the bears and give them names such as Mr Chocolate, film them and position himself as their saviour. And then he was eaten by a bear. Because he had no idea. He never bothered to study bear behaviour or have any respect for the laws of nature that were there long before him. Greenloop is the lovechild of Timothy Treadwell and Steve Jobs.

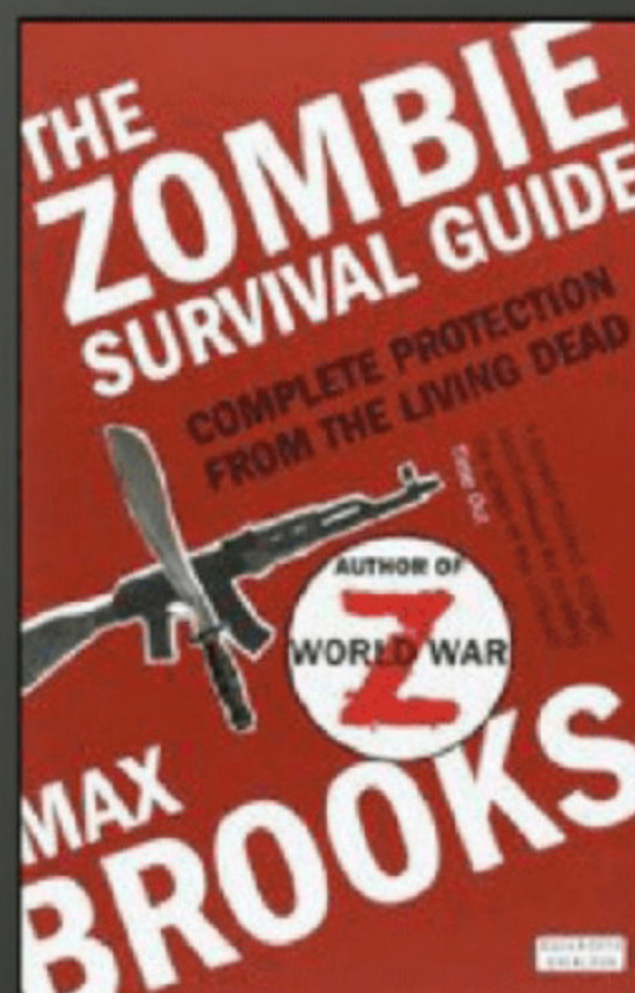
How did you approach the Sasquatch myth?

As a little kid, I saw these two competing notions of Sasquatch. One was that it was a gentle giant that we all should love. And the other one was that it was a bloodthirsty killer. And neither one is true. My basic premise with any novel is to say 'if this was going to happen then how would it happen?'. If Sasquatch were real, it would not be evil or good, it would just be an animal. And an animal with its own set of rules that you would have to respect and adapt to. It's that simple.

And you have your human characters resorting to their animal instincts?

When I thought of the title, I thought of it as humans having to get in touch with their more primitive nature and a primitive skillset in order to survive a primitive threat.

Your zombie books are focused on a global threat whereas here it is an isolated account. Where do you see the bigger picture for the

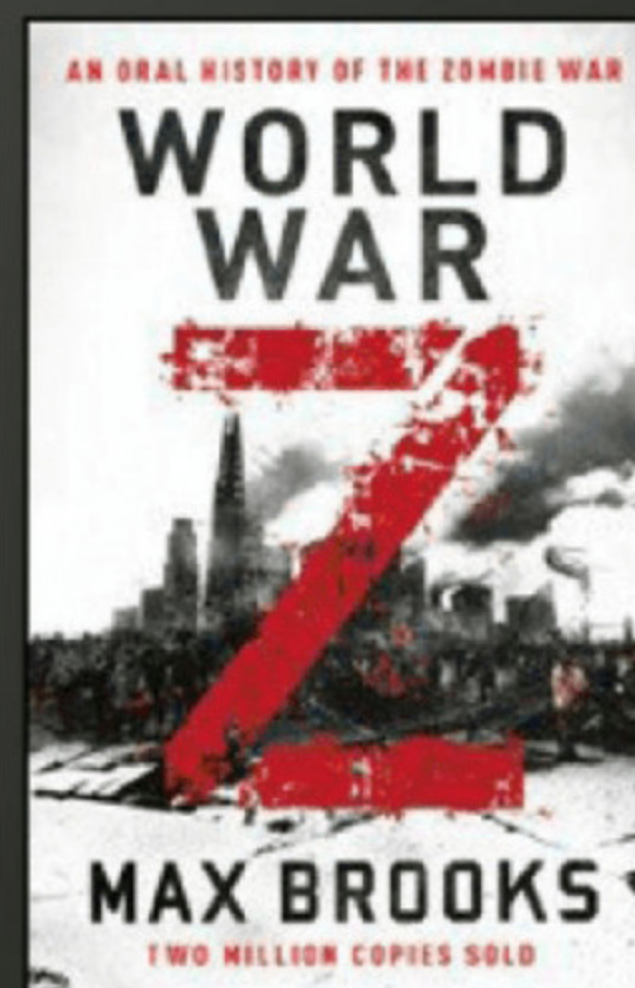


messages here?

We are as a species, certainly in the West, rushing to create a society that is based upon comfort rather than resilience. We are gutting all the safeguards that got us to this point, without understanding that we are potentially sowing the seeds of disaster. As an example, if you go to your local supermarket everything is fresh, same day delivery. A hundred years ago, everything was pickled, everything was salted, everything was dried; it stayed on the shelves for months. Now the notion is that we want fresh food the moment I walk into the supermarket. Which is great. Until the trucks stop coming. Then the food rots on the second day. We love to be able to tap on our screens and order anything. We are at such a point of comfort and security - and ignorance - we are even questioning basic things like vaccines. There is a level of comfort now that enough human beings can question whether the vaccine is worse than the disease. Which would have been incomprehensible 50 years ago when diseases like polio would just ravage us. Therefore, we can question everything that got us here. And then there are people who do not want to pay taxes anymore for everything that moved us out of the dark ages. Comfort is great, but not at the expense of resilience.

Do you foresee that, as a race, we will continue driving towards something that will ultimately destroy us?

I don't see one apocalyptic moment, but I see them happening all the time. And you can see it right now with the coronavirus. For decades, we decided that it was cheaper to outsource the production of medical supplies to China. Much cheaper. However, what if in a pandemic you need those supplies, but they are made in a country that is holding



on to them because that is ground zero. We do not have enough surgical masks in the US because they are made in China. We did that based on comfort and greed.

Escalation happens quickly...

I tried to get that point of being cut off across in *Devolution*. You know, 'does anyone have a paper map?' And nobody does.

Does your interest in survival and apocalyptic scenarios stem from somewhere specific?

It's all personal. It comes from living in Southern California where we have earthquakes, we have floods, and we have horrendous fires. And we have riots! When I was a kid, we had a plague; we had AIDS. And we weren't ready for any of it; my mother [Mrs Robinson star Anne Bancroft] was what you might call a 'prepper'. I dislike that phrase applied to my mum as it implies some crazed redneck living in a bunker in the wilderness, but she was prepared. We always had an earthquake kit and a plan. She was always ready. When AIDS came around, my mother decided to learn everything so she could prepare me as an adolescent man.

With *Devolution*, you have written a fast-paced survival horror. Was it always the plan to keep it short and was there a lot you left out?

The only reason it is shorter is because when I read it, I felt I needed to speed things up. I read it as a reader and the early drafts were too slow. It's at the pace I would want to read. There was a lot of backstory and lot of build-up, but I also intentionally left some things unanswered.

DEVOLUTION is out now, published by Century.

[Note: This conversation took place before the dreadful extent of the coronavirus pandemic became apparent.]

"If Sasquatch were real, it would not be evil or good, it would just be an animal. And an animal with its own set of rules that you would have to respect and adapt to. It's that simple."



Max Brooks with his father Mel Brooks

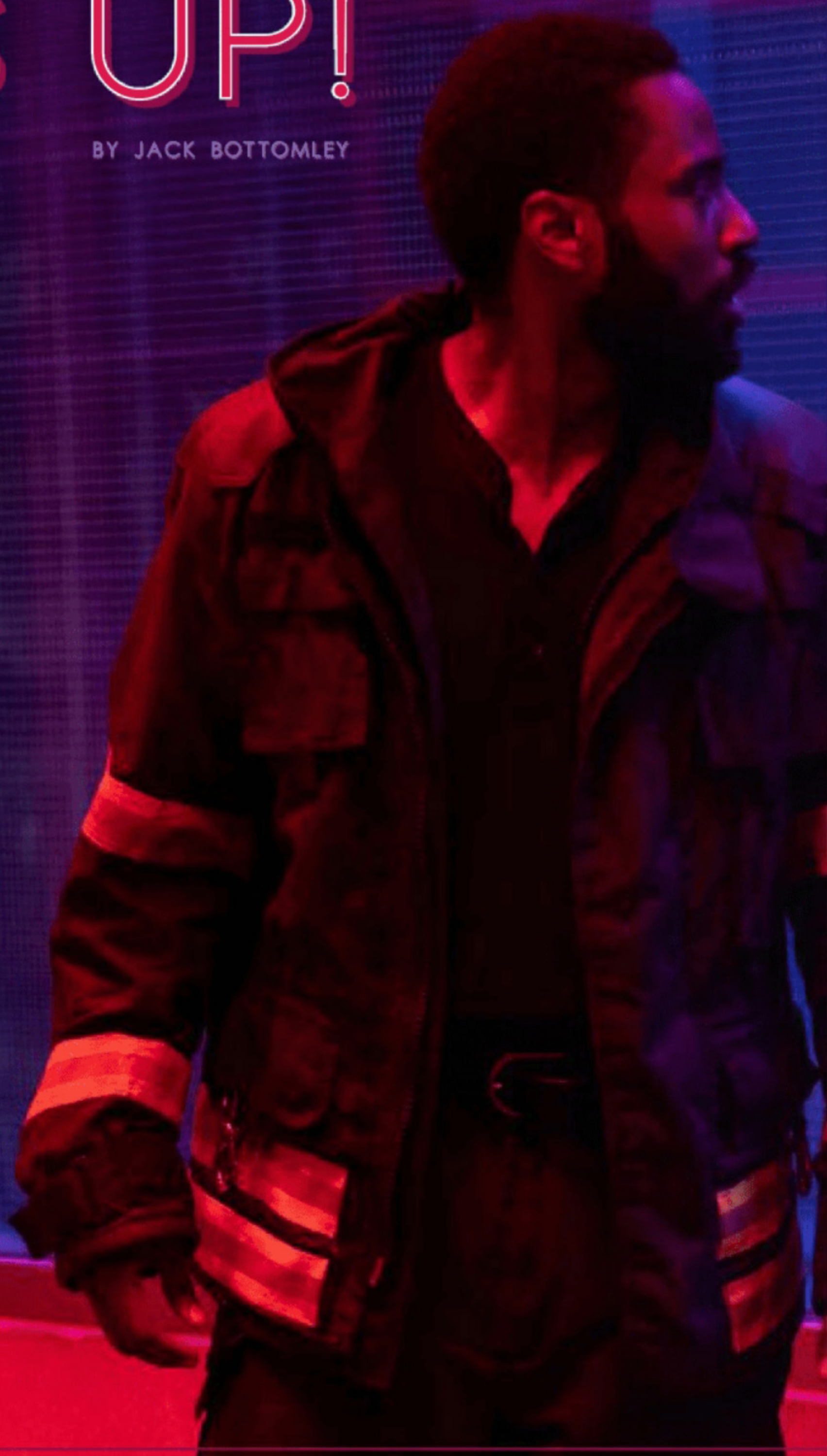
TIME'S UP!

BY JACK BOTTOMLEY

STARBURST TAKES A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE AT WHAT TO EXPECT FROM CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S LATEST, **TENET**...

Nowadays we often find that we have the benefit of knowing the ins and outs of a film well before its official release. In this spoiler-filled age of scoops, 'hot takes', social media, and up-to-the-second news reporting, it's difficult to keep a lid on movies (or anything for that matter) and the secrets they hold. However, big screen titan Christopher Nolan is never one to let slip on vital information, and with his latest film *Tenet* we find that we are more out of the (time) loop than ever. As the Corona pandemic has sent the film industry into a bigger whirl than that spinning top at the end of *Inception*, now more than ever it feels like the future isn't set and *Tenet* maybe the perfect movie for this time because it is equally as uncertain. So taking all this into account, what can we tell you about *Tenet*? Well, the short answer is we can tell you a bit. The long answer is...

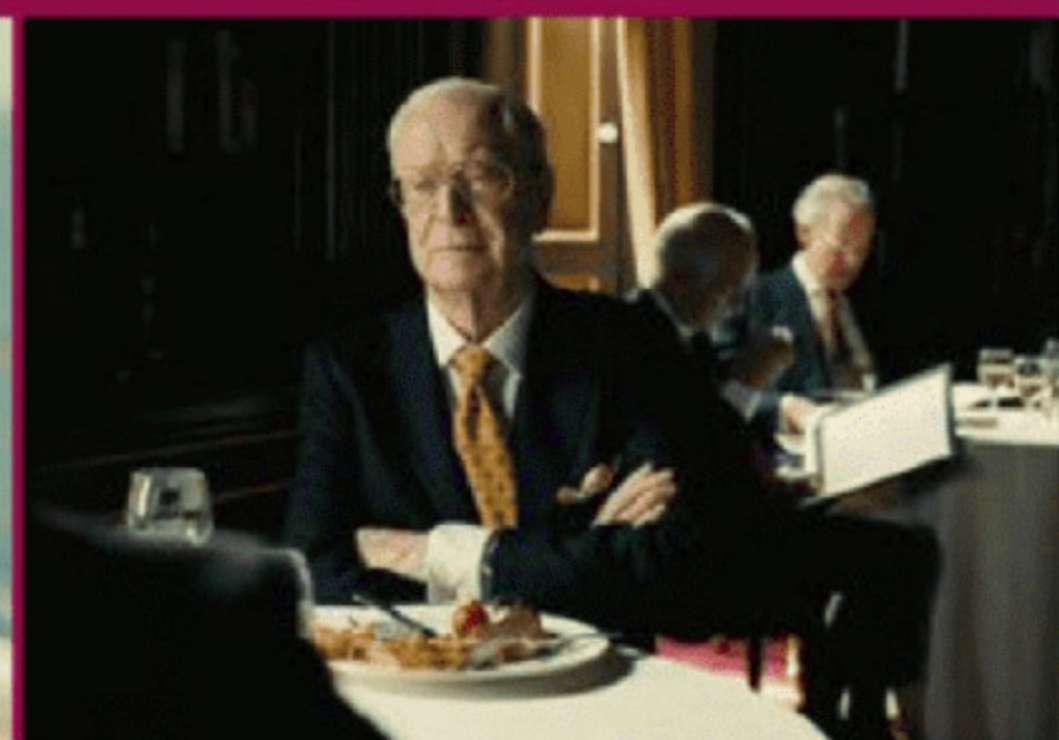
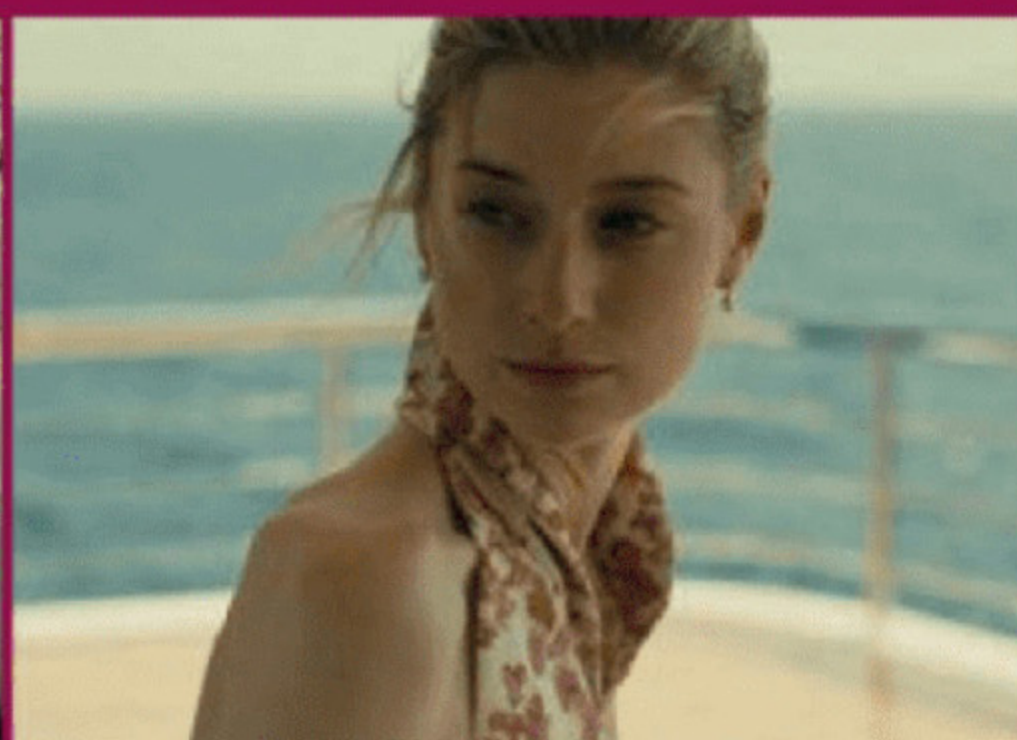
Tenet is writer/director Christopher Nolan's eleventh feature film and the fifth released in his 'lucky' release date slot (this year may test that theory) of the third week in July, which (as this writer punches in the words) it is still dead set on being. It would





definitely be an experiment to see whether audiences would brave heading to the movies after the most uncertain time in many people's lifetimes, but Nolan is driven to get cinemas back and *Tenet* is the perfect film to re-open those doors. The film concerns a man (played by John David Washington) who has proven his mettle and is given a rare chance to enter a secret world, one of international espionage and time-based impossibilities, with the ultimate goal of stopping World War III or "something worse" than Armageddon itself. That's about all anybody knows of the basic plot outline, but the limited details revealed thus far have acted as breadcrumbs for us. Where these lead, however, remains refreshingly and tantalisingly unclear. Despite operating initially under the working title of 'Merry-Go-Round' while this highly secretive project was in pre-production, the perplexing palindrome final title *Tenet* not only refers to the nature of the story but literally what lies within it.

Presumably, but not certainly, this word refers to either an organisation, device or - as the latest footage we've seen suggests - a pathway to unlimited possibility, but either way it's a word likely reflective of the movie itself: puzzling, intriguing, and constantly moving forwards and backwards and working either way. Promising a tale of resurrection and time travel (sorry, that's "inversion"), this has been described as an 'event' movie but once again the biggest event is Nolan delving into the human mind and testing its very limits and, y'know, releasing on time too. His work has constantly been existential or philosophically inclined, tackling the likes of memory, purpose, morality, and especially time, and with *Tenet* time is to be more dissected than ever but so too is man's perception of what is possible





with that time. The real event here will be discovering a whole new world that surrounds our own like a cinematic cling film, enhancing that which it binds. The fact we know so little about it makes it all the more effective and eagerly anticipated.

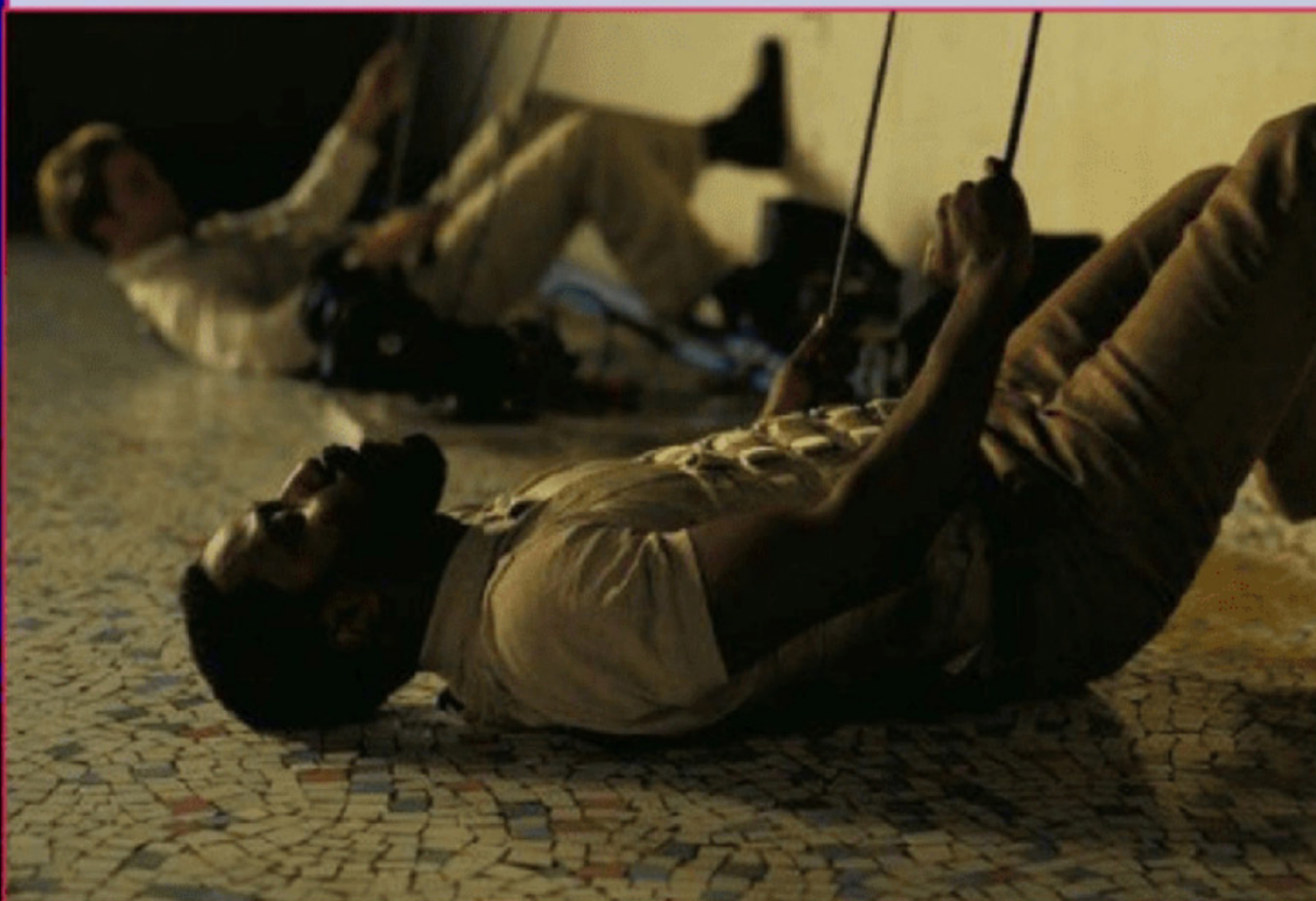
Shot in Nolan's trusted 70mm IMAX format, this is going to be a grand picture aesthetically. Like *Dunkirk*, *Interstellar*, *Inception*, and *The Dark Knight Trilogy* before it, Nolan continues to heighten the senses on the big screen, and already this looks like it will be another breathtaking immersion into what IMAX can achieve. The first insight into the film came ahead

of *Hobbs & Shaw* in a 40-second teaser (unreleased online) but it wasn't until December we got a weightier serving. Playing in IMAX cinemas before *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, the *Tenet* prologue came as a rollicking surprise to legions of cinemagoers excited and seated comfortably, fervently awaiting the climax of the Skywalker saga. Across the duration (six minutes to be precise - after all, time is critical here), we received a dramatic and pulse-racing collection of action from the film. The crescendo of which being a set-piece that evoked the Bane plane heist in *The Dark Knight Rises* in its

craftsmanship - well thought out execution and pure intensity. This prologue soon led to a full trailer days later, and audiences were actively encouraged to go running alongside the characters into the proverbial burning building, while the last footage released in May offered even more high wire leaping action stunts, some bullet-catching gunshots (yes, you read that right), mind-messing story beats and engrossingly vast cinematography, as time's natural order is re-assessed.

For the first time since *The Prestige*, Hans Zimmer will not have composed a score for Nolan, due to his scheduling conflicts with Dennis Villeneuve's *Dune*. Instead, *Venom*, *Black Panther*, and *The Mandalorian*'s Ludwig Göransson will be on scoring duty. The footage gave us a sample of what's in store and, in a year that has already seen Thomas Newman floor us in *1917* and Daniel Pemberton rock us with *Birds of Prey*, Göransson's work here could be the soundtrack to watch out for in 2020. Another regular collaborator not present is editor Lee Smith who - for the first time since *Batman Begins* - will not be working with Nolan, due to a scheduling conflict with Sam Mendes' aforementioned award-winning war epic *1917*, in his place will be *Hereditary*'s Jennifer Lame and what a choice that is, considering the power of her work in Ari Aster's horror masterpiece. Some cohorts are returning, though; cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema boards a Nolan picture for the third time now. With it being the writer/director's most expensive original work to date, with a production budget of \$205 million, we can expect some incredible and memorable scenes to add to the cinematic scrapbook.

Having said that, as we discuss talent and calibre, *Tenet*'s cast is one to well and



truly sink your movie-loving teeth into. *BlackKkKlansman*'s John David Washington leads the film as the - as yet unnamed - protagonist. He finds himself reborn into this whole new world, the rules of which are different to those which he knows, and - among other things - he will learn that worse things lie ahead than a potential nuclear holocaust. While our next Batman, Robert Pattinson, also co-stars (ironically under the wings of a Bat auteur) and he has called the script "unreal", as his character looks to have a flair for the dramatic. He is joined even more appropriately by former Alfred, Michael Caine, a Nolan regular who - like Pattinson - has made much of this production's mystique. It is rather comforting to hear that the cast was often as much in the dark as we are when it comes to the overall narrative. Pattinson was only allowed to read his script once, in a locked Warner Brothers room (no 'left it under the bed' palaver with this film, thank you very much). Meanwhile, Caine does not know a thing about the plot, as he was not able to read the script at all; he just filmed his part on the day and was given his pages!

Joining these three big names is another in *Dunkirk*'s Kenneth Branagh, who looks like he could be playing a villain of sorts judging by the latest footage but nothing is a cert at this point, along with *Widows* and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* star Elizabeth Debicki and Indian icon Dimple Kapadia, who makes her first major Hollywood feature debut in *Tenet*, with her character reported to have a link to actor Denzel Smith's character in the film. While others stars include *Godzilla*, *Nocturnal Animals* and *Kick-Ass* actor Aaron Taylor-Johnson, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Parts I and II*'s Clémence Poésy, *Yesterday*'s Himesh Patel, *Insomnia*'s Martin Donovan, and former ice hockey star Sean Avery.

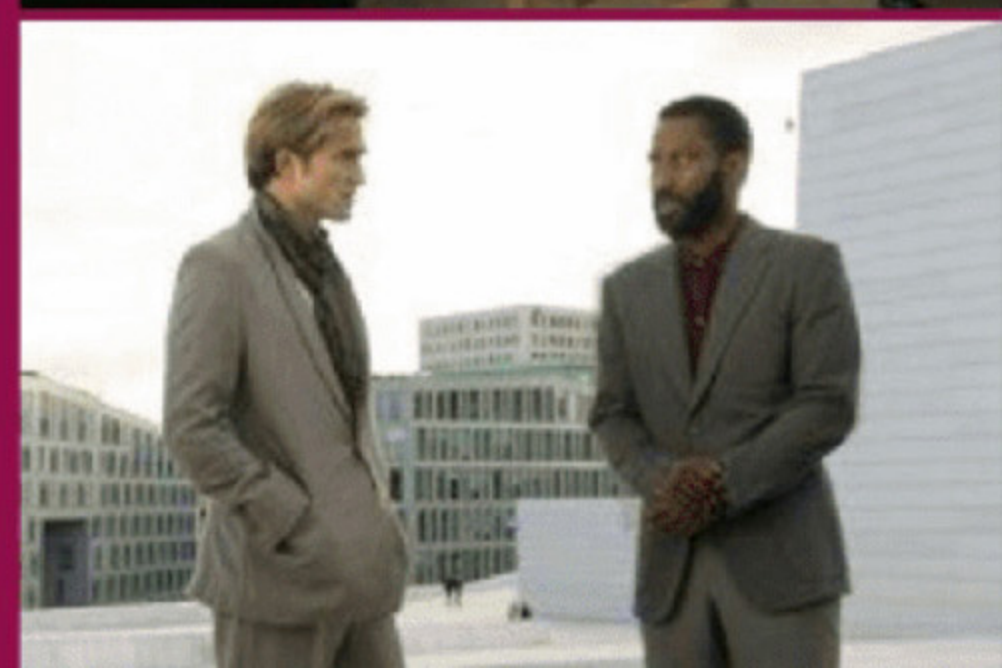
So now that we have checked off the facts, what can we expect to receive here? 'Time Runs Out' reads the tagline of *Tenet*'s poster and as the sands begin to cascade down the narrow neck of the hourglass, we can only ask more questions as to where we will be taken this July. Time this year has perhaps proved more valuable than ever to many. It has come to mean a great deal more than it did just months prior. But in Nolan's world, time has always been of the utmost importance to the human race, and to what end will it serve or hinder these characters remains to be seen?

Time travel is a well-worn device in

everything from H.G. Wells to *Family Guy*, but if history has taught us anything, it is that Nolan can be relied upon to strap our expectations down to a rotating wheel and throw knives of twists and ambition right at them. This is not 'time travel', it's inversion and while we could already predict that it would be no simple time travel caper, that is only appropriate because time is rarely ever simple, it is complex, meaningful, and directly intertwined with humanity. *Tenet* promises exhilarating spy-like thrills, of course, but also, in what little we have been shown, a story of evolving, reversing, and adapting, facing down (or rather facing back) the inevitability of disaster. However, we have yet to find out whether or not time will be on our side.

We could drive ourselves mad guessing about what awaits us, when it comes to *Tenet* only Nolan knows what lies ahead and behind or what any of it means but "don't try to understand it, just feel it". And while the movie is set to fracture time, it conversely has our undivided attention. Tick tock, tick tock...

TENET is set to start the stopwatch in cinemas soon. For up to date release information on this title and more, visit starburstmagazine.com



STARBURST

INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

PHOTO REVIEW

Words: Martin Unsworth

Photography: Jo Lowes



On March 13th and 14th, STARBURST took residence at Social7 at the Landing, MediaCityUK in Salford, Manchester to celebrate independent film with the STARBURST International Film Festival...

In its fourth iteration, the STARBURST International Film Festival attracts members of the film industry and fans from all over the world to enjoy new and classic films in a fantastic environment. This year, we were delighted to welcome actor Laurence R. Harvey and artist Graham Humphreys as our guests of honour. They mingled with attendees and took place in some very special events. The former provided a live commentary for *The Human Centipede 2 (Full Sequence)* to an appreciative crowd - even if the film did cause a few members of the audience to squirm often. The latter was interviewed on stage by host Andrew Keates and thrilled everyone with details of his work, and did a roaring trade signing prints and books afterwards.

The bar, as always, was a bustling hub for everyone to chat about the movies and shorts, grab some refreshments, and for filmmakers to network or catch up with old friends. Director and producer Lawrie Brewster was there with his company Hex Media, filming all the proceedings for an amusing 90-minute documentary, which is available to view now on YouTube. Lawrie won the Best Director award in 2019 for his film *Automata* (now renamed *The Devil's Machine*), and was screening his redux colour version of *The Black Gloves* at this year's festival.

A film festival is only as good as the movies it screens, and this year we were spoilt for choice when it came to quality content. With three screens in constant use and at



capacity, we managed to fit 40+ features and shorts in over the two days. It was great to see so many people sharing the love of the films they saw on social media, too. Among the world premieres this year, we had *A Little More Flesh*, directed by Sam Ashurst and destined to be a much-talked about cause célèbre in the months to come thanks to its controversial content and shocking climax. It's a film worthy of thought, though, and one that makes an important point about filmmakers in the past and how attitudes have (mostly) changed for the better. The team from *Chestersberg* - including director Jamie McKeller, actors Andy Love, Laura McKeller, and Andrew Lee Potts - took part in a spirited Q & A following the first audience screening of the fun, gore-filled film. Charlie Steeds was on hand to debut his new film *An English Haunting*, which played to a large, appreciative audience. Locally-made anthology *Surprise* also delighted a packed room with directors David Green and Dan McGee, and actor Laura Ellen Wilson in attendance. We also hosted the UK premiere of *Stay Alive Stay Out*, directed by Dean Yurke and starring Barbara Crampton.

Short films were, as always, a major part of the schedule and we screened numerous world premieres, English premieres, and regional debuts. Plenty of filmmakers and actors attended to support their shorts, including return visits for Scott Lyus (*Black Mass*), Emma Dark (*House of Lexi*) and the team from *Demonologist for Hire*. There was also a number of special events, including two filmmakers' panels, which provided plenty of insight for those looking



Andrew Keates in conversation with our guest Graham Humphreys





Dean Yurke



Johnny Vivash



Beth Napoli



Yuichi Kondo

to get into the business. With such a wealth of talent on the stage, there was certainly plenty to learn, even for experienced directors and actors.

The festival culminated in the STARBURST Fantasy Awards, a celebration of independent cinema and chosen from the FilmFreeway submissions that we received and screened this year. With so many amazing entries, it was a tough decision to make as all the movies and shorts shown over the two days were worthy of accolades. However, a final decision must be made, and the winners were:

BEST ART AND DESIGN

From set-builds to costuming, every frame of every film will contain some aspect of Art & Design, but which of our competing films went above and beyond?

Dead Air, director: Geoff Harmer, writer: Peter Hearn

DISTINCTION IN SOUND

Be it the sound design, mix, or original score, this award allows us to highlight an aural standout amongst our entries.

I Scream on the Beach, composer: Levi Miah, directors: Alexander Churchyard, Michael Holiday

BEST CINEMATOGRAPHY

It takes a good eye to bring stories to life, so it's only right that these visual artists are singularly recognised for their craft too.

Darling, Darling Wendy, director of photography - Beth Napoli

THE CHARLIE ALLBRIGHT AWARD

Named after our late writer and academic, who we not only counted as a colleague but a friend. This award will be presented every year to the film or individual that we feel best promotes LGBTQ+ values.

Royko's Qubit Summer, director - Yuichi Kondo

BEST SCREENPLAY

Scott Lyus, **Black Mass**

BEST PERFORMANCE

Johnny Vivash, **Black Mass**

BEST SHORT

Eject, director - David Yorke

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David Yorke, **Eject**

BEST FEATURE *sponsored by Horror Channel*
Stay Out Stay Alive, director - Dean Yurke

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Andrew Lee Potts

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David Yorke



Michael Holiday & Alexander Churchyard



Andrew Lee Potts



Scott Lyus



Guest Laurence R. Harvey doing live commentary over Human Centipede 2 (Full Sequence) with Martin Unsworth

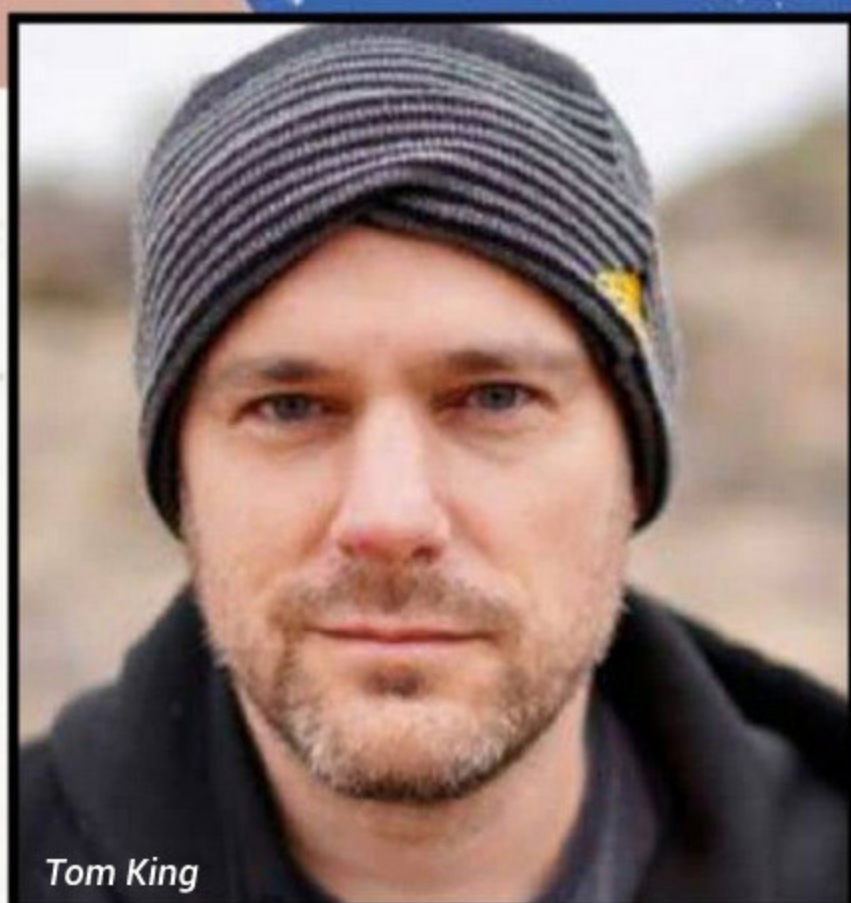


PEOPLE ARE STRANGE

Words:
Hayden
Mears

Writer TOM KING and artists
MITCH GERADS & DOC SHANER
Talk DC Comics' breakthrough
new book, STRANGE ADVENTURES...





Tom King



Evan 'Doc' Shaner

You'd be hard-pressed to find a storytelling trio as cosmically perfect as the one Tom King, Mitch Gerads, and Evan 'Doc' Shaner so effortlessly form. King and Gerads turned heads with *Sheriff of Babylon* and *Mister Miracle*, two books that helped cement the pair as one of the finest writer/artist teams in comics. Now, Shaner, another respected talent in the industry, joins the indomitable duo on a new series that promises to be just as fun and thoughtful as everything else they've done together. With the all-new, 12-issue *Strange Adventures*, King, Gerads, and Shaner bring new relevance and resonance to Adam Strange, a hero who hasn't known this bright of a spotlight in years. The limited series tackles truth, lies, and the human way, showcasing a wise, even prudent, approach that emphasises the importance of inspection and introspection in a post-truth era. The first issue hit shelves recently and, as expected, it's a showstopper. STARBURST caught up with King, Gerads, and Shaner at Chicago Comic and Entertainment Expo (C2E2), one of the largest pop culture conventions in the Midwest and a hub for comic creators...

STARBURST: How did this project come about?

Mitch Gerads: At my house. [laughs]

Tom King: [Laughs] *Mister Miracle* was doing well, and we were sort of looking for our next thing. I was at Mitch's house for the baptism of his son, and we were literally going through his shelf being like, "What should we do next?" *Mister Miracle* was given to us and we had to shape it into something. And this time DC was like, "Find whatever you want." And Mitch picked Adam Strange. That's the best thing that can happen to a writer,

when an artist picks a character. I went home and came up with the plot that night.

It's got to be nice to see books on a shelf and be like, "I can pitch that to DC!"

TK: That is nice, yeah.

MG: Absolutely. We're in the car on the way to the church the next day, and he pitches the entire thing to me and goes, "And here's the best part: We bring in another artist!"

Doc Shaner: It really is!

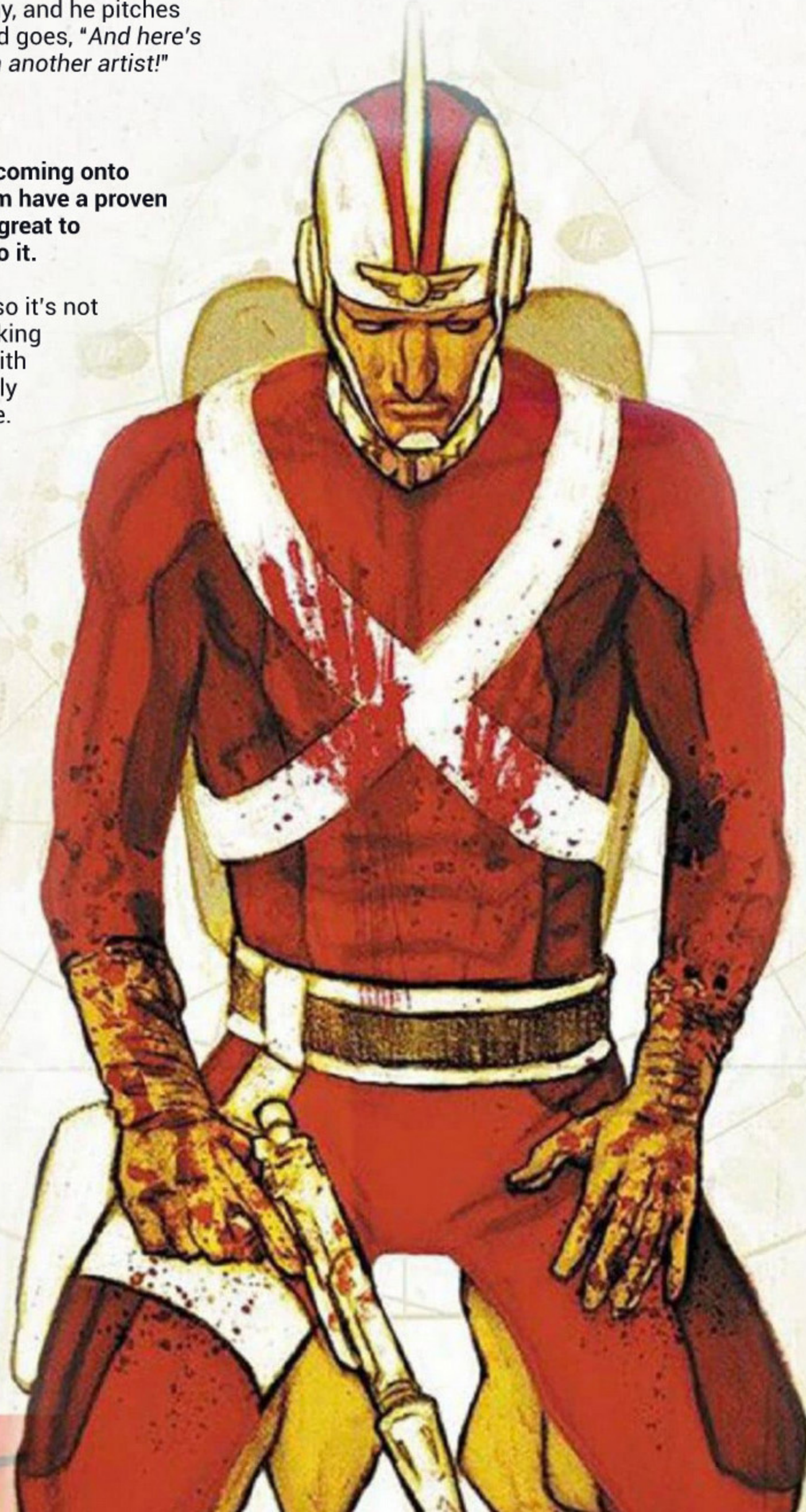
So Doc, what was it like coming onto this book? Mitch and Tom have a proven chemistry, so it must be great to come into that and add to it.

DS: I knew them before, so it's not like it's my first time working with them. I've worked with Tom before. So it's exactly how I thought it would be. I knew these guys had a foundation going so it's great walking into something like that. We're just kind of adding to what they did before with *Sheriff of Babylon* and *Mister Miracle*. Knowing that there's already consistency there and being able to jump into that is refreshing, actually.

Unlike *Mister Miracle*, which dealt with the effects of trauma,

we know that this one deals more with truth and assumptions of truth and stuff like that. How is that depicted on the page? How did you translate Tom's script into something that's pretty abstract into art that could visually represent that?

MG: I think Tom's strength when he writes is that the characters feel real.



Tom King: What? [laughs]

MG: I've read a lot of scripts where it's like, "Oh, these are comic book people doing comic book things." And Tom writes human people doing comic book things. It's a different way to approach it, and I think that emotion comes through. So you just kind of start with that emotion and you plug the characters into it.

TK: The idea was always, from the beginning, that we're gonna do something that was about the difference between a fantasy and reality and how those two work together and how one influences the other. Mitch draws grounded comics, but he uses a lot of abstract stuff in his work. But somehow you feel the crack of the desert under your feet, as they say. The book is really weird because the art switches between panels, so it requires a lot of coordination.

DS: I agree with all of that. I can't imagine doing this book with somebody I didn't know.

Are the book's themes at all influenced by today's political climate?

TK: Yeah. I think you can go as far as to say it's driving it. Our attempt was to do what *Watchmen* did. It was a comic that existed for all time, but it also talked to the political climate and said something true about when it was created. And because it said something true, it's become immortal. So yeah, this is very much about our current moment in world history, the same way *Mister Miracle* was about dealing with events that feel incomprehensible to you and seeing what that does to your family. This is about deciding if someone is lying to you. And it seems like in our current atmosphere, watching TV, doing anything, you're constantly having to make a decision and ask yourself, "Is this a lie? Do I accept the lie?"

MG: And then there are different ways that lies and the truth are being told.

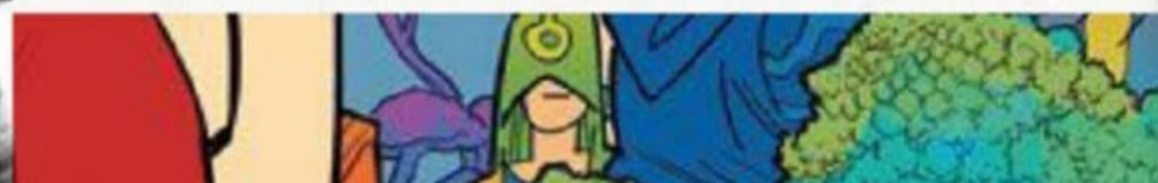


Sometimes it's passive, sometimes it's not. Or sometimes people don't know they're lying, but that's their recollection. And then other times they're lying because they're trying to get a point through. The book speaks to a lot of that and kind of makes you wonder who's on the up and up.

TK: The book takes place in two different timelines at the same time. Mitch's portion is an investigation into Doc's portion. It blends together. You get kind of a layered understanding.

DS: I'm drawing the story Adam Strange is telling when he gets back to Earth. It's been interesting to explore those space adventures, and that's the part I've been enjoying the most so far, kind of bringing that stuff into the DC universe and visualising the planet Rann. It's nice to kind of expand on what Rann is. I'm excited!

STRANGE ADVENTURES #1 and #2 are available in comic book stores and digitally through ReadDC.com or Comixology.



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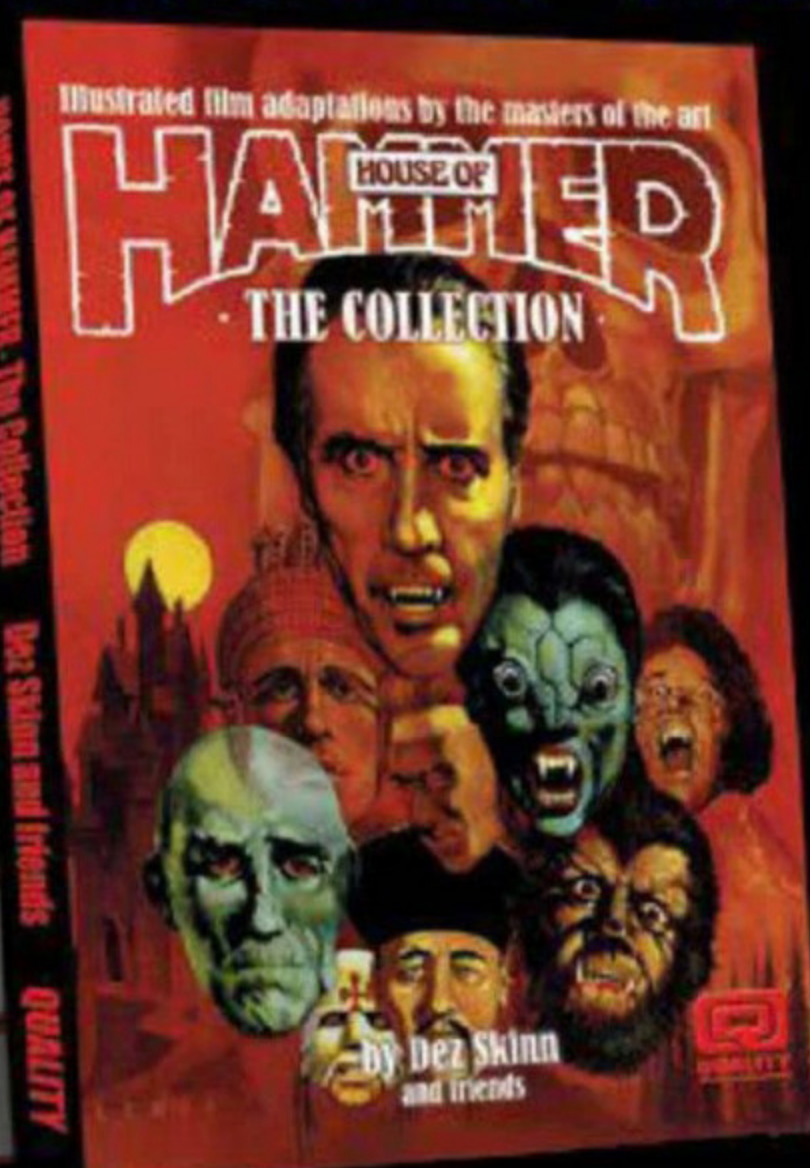


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GOLDEN GIRL

BY LAURA GRIFFITHS

GET YOUR LEG WARMERS
AND PARACHUTE PANTS
AT THE READY, THE
HOTLY ANTICIPATED
**WONDER
WOMAN**
SEQUEL IS TAKING
US BACK TO
THE '80s...

This summer, Wonder Woman will be following in the retro footsteps of recent STARBURST favourites *Stranger Things* and *American Horror Story* by adopting a kaleidoscopic colour palette, killer soundtrack (props to the fantastic sound editing on New Order's *Blue Monday* in the trailer) and heading back to our favourite decade.

Set for release in August, (pushed back from a June release due to the lockdown restrictions), the film picks up nearly 70 years after Wonder Woman's solo debut. Told as a flashback, the first film saw Diana Prince (Gal Gadot) on a mission to defeat the god of war and acclimatise to life away from the paradise island of Themyscira during the events of World War I alongside US pilot and love interest Captain Steve Trevor (Chris Pine). With director Patty Jenkins at the helm once more, *Wonder Woman 1984*'s timing, as the title reveals, is set against the backdrop of the Cold War, which forces Diana into conflict with the Soviet Union and a new foe by the name of Cheetah, played by Kristen Wiig. More on her later.

2017's *Wonder Woman* was Gadot's first full outing as the popular DC Comics hero. The film was the fourth instalment in the DC Extended Universe, which, let's be honest, wasn't on the best of rolls at the time after the chilly critical response received by *Suicide Squad* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, where the character was introduced. The subsequent *Justice League* movie, which also starred Gadot alongside newcomers Aquaman, Cyborg, and The Flash, didn't fare much better. Yet after generating a swell of positive reviews, the character-driven *Wonder Woman* turned out to be a massive hit, grossing \$821.8 million worldwide and is still one of the most successful movies of the franchise to date. We shouldn't have expected anything less from the woman who was literally sculpted from clay by the Queen of the Amazons and brought to life by Zeus himself.

Now, decades later, Diana finds herself alone having lost her friends in the intervening years and figuring out what's next. "My life hasn't been what you probably think it has,"

says Diana in the footage we've seen is the biggest understatement of the century. With a script penned by Jenkins with DC's former Chief Creative Officer Geoff Johns and David Callahan, it's an entirely different chapter set in an entirely different world to the one we first met Diana. The character of Wonder Woman has been around for over 75 years since her *All-Star Comics* debut and there is a lot of source material to choose from, so what exactly was it about this decadent decade that appealed to Jenkins? Speaking in a panel at San Diego Comic-Con in 2017, Jenkins shared that she feels the decade, with its Cold War backdrop, represents "mankind at its best and worst" and she wanted to explore how Wonder Woman would exist in a period of time that's "really us at our most extreme". In fact, Jenkins is said to have already conceived what she believed the second movie should be halfway through making the original, so it's far from a case of following the current trend for '80s nostalgia. That said, judging by the power dressing and set pieces we've already glimpsed, you can tell the filmmakers had a lot of fun playing around with a time period that's ever ripe for a revisit.

POWER SUITS

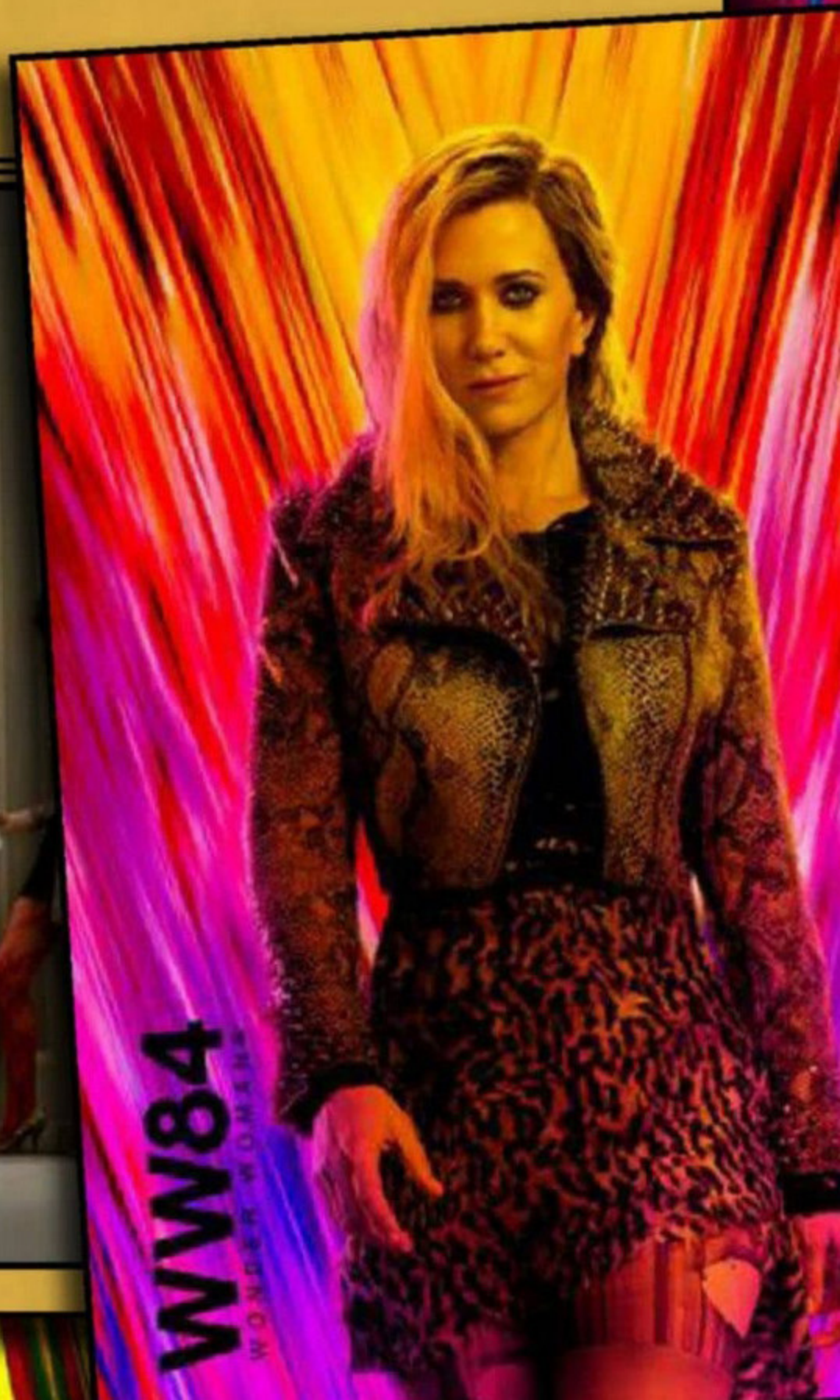
Diana's first venture into the land of men made for some of the film's more light-hearted moments through innocent questions around couples holding hands to a southerly pointing "what's that?" towards a stark-naked Chris Pine - it's hard to believe anyone who has a grasp on reproductive biology and has read "all 12 volumes of *Clio's treatises on bodily pleasure*" would have such questions, but we digress! But that period setting also meant we got a classic movie dress up montage to ensure the Amazon princess blended into the grey exterior of WWI London (yeah sure, stick a pair of glasses on her, that will do the trick!). Does that mean this time around we can expect to see our leading lady kitted out in protective shoulder pads and a bulletproof backcombed wig to rest her warrior headgear? New images depict Diana in a



decidedly more disco version of her staple battle armour. Gone is the iconic blue and red two-piece in favour of a shiny new winged Golden Eagle suit lifted straight from of the original comics. That doesn't mean her signature suit is gone for good and we've been promised plenty of action shots of Gadot golden lassoing her way around in that instantly recognisable warrior uniform everywhere from a shopping mall to the desert.

WHO IS CHEETAH?

While that 2017 solo movie saw Diana wielding the 'Godkiller' across Germany to defeat a general of the Ottoman Empire, who was developing a deadlier form of mustard gas, and an ancient god under the guise of Sir Patrick Morgan of the Supreme War Council, her second big screen outing sees her up against Kristen Wiig's Barbara





Minerva, aka supervillainess Cheetah, and Pedro Pascal's meta-human millionaire Maxwell Lord.

In the comics, Minerva is an archaeologist who comes into contact with Wonder Woman when she learns she is in possession of the Lasso of Truth. Minerva is said to have gained her cheetah powers from a tribe in Africa where she took the place of a slain female guardian in a bid to gain mortality. Unfortunately, Minerva didn't bother to read the fine print that said the keeper of the power must be a virgin, which led to a half curse, half blessing sort of deal. Jenkins recently mentioned that she saw Cheetah as the "warm, funny friend who's kind and interesting and then can transform into something completely different," which we can see through a bespectacled Wiig's comedic approach to the character in an early conversation with Diana. Preview footage doesn't give too much away about how close Wiig's interpretation of the character will be or what Cheetah will even look like, but it appears as though Diana and the seemingly awkward Minerva will start off as friends until she inevitably shows her cheetah spots. However, a supposedly leaked promo image of Wiig's Cheetah

transformation (which has since been taken down from the Internet, leading eagle-eyed fans to assume it was in fact an official DC image) presents a more realistic take on the Cheetah look. That means, so far at least, no horrible *Cats*-like CGI.

Maxwell Lord on the other hand first appeared in the *Justice League* comic series in 1987 as a shrewd businessman who eventually helped to form Justice League International under the proviso that the best way to prevent what he perceived as a threat from those with superpowers was to control them. He's one of those classic bad guys who doesn't think he's the bad guy and, in the end, gained his own superpowers that gave him the ability to control minds, which at times have even provided him the upper hand over even the most super beings like Superman. The only images of Lord we have had are those of him spouting prototypical inspirational business talk from an old TV set ("Life is good but it can be better... all you need is to want it!") and sitting at a fancy desk clutching at some kind of artefact. The artefact could hint at a relationship with Minerva but so far, it's unclear how or when he'll transform into the mind controlling supervillain from the comics. Depending on the direction the filmmakers

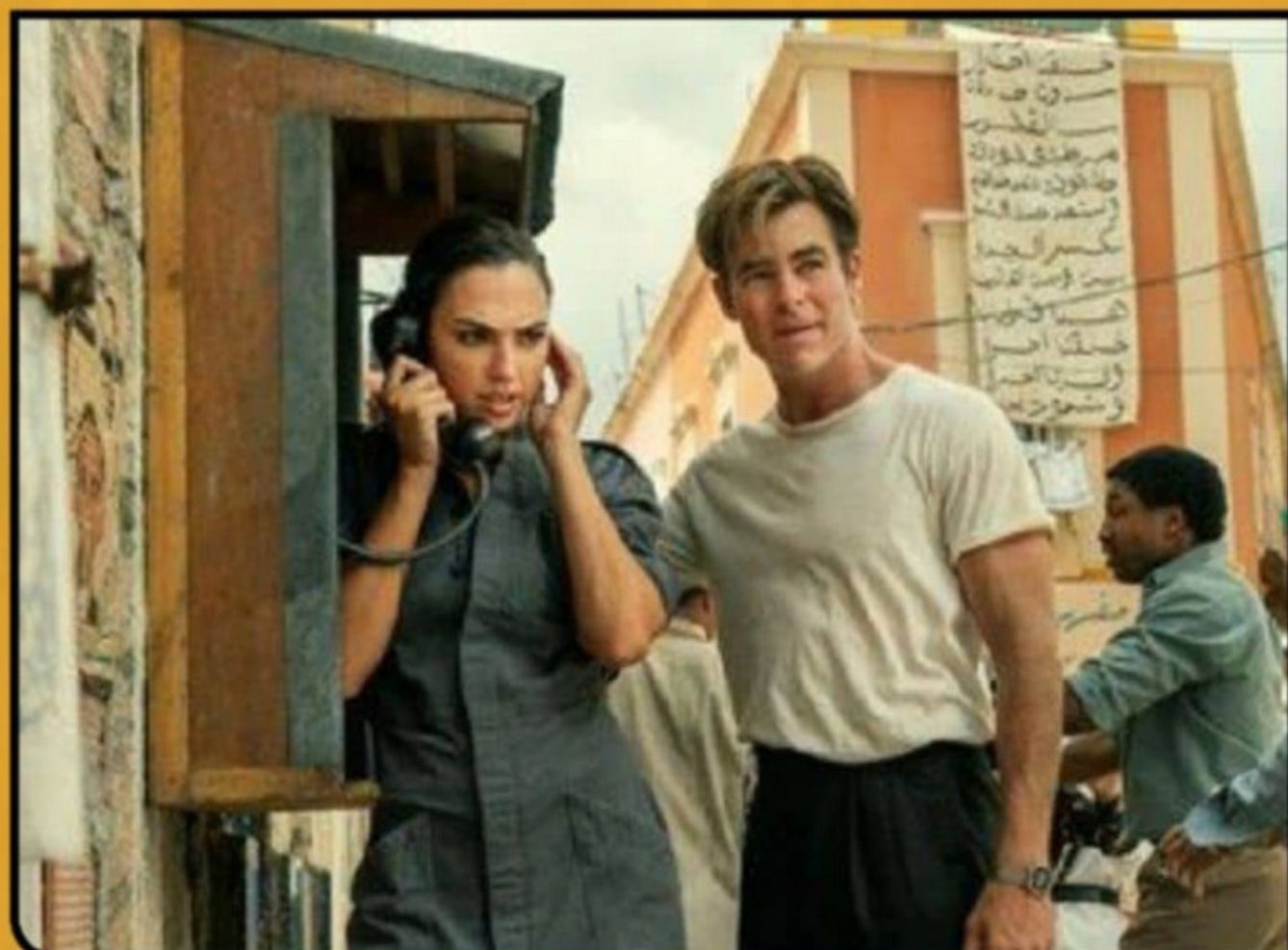
decide to go, it could end up with devastating consequences for Diana if the original *Wonder Woman* #219 storyline, which sees Diana throwing the Lasso of truth around Lord, is any sort of indicator of the villain's fate.

As vague as the filmmakers are being around the identity of their villains, perhaps the biggest mystery the trailer offers is the return of Steve who, at the end of the last movie, seemingly went up in the flames with the stack of weapons he was flying out of Germany. We've known about Pine's return since Jenkins teased a handful of early set photos back in 2018, but the question still lingers; how on earth is this guy still alive? Well, this is comic book land so pretty much anything is plausible, but while Jenkins has kept the method behind Steve's surprise appearance under wraps (though at 2018's San Diego Comic-Con she teased that Trevor's return hasn't just been thrown in and will be "a very important part" of the movie), fans have naturally offered their theories from time jumps to a long-lost grandson. It could be a case of divine intervention - did one of the gods jump in to save him at the last second? Is he a clone? Could Diana just be seeing things at the will of Lord's mind control? Time travel? (Take note of all those close-ups of watches in the trailers...). Pine has previously commented that the role has a completely different tone this time around with a bit of a role reversal that sees Diana now helping *him* to acclimatise to modern times. He said, "*The tables are turned, and I'm more of the deer in the headlights,*" which sounds to us like Steve has perhaps just woken up in his bomber jacket and Nike trainers combo, without a single wrinkle on his face, and found himself catapulted to this unfamiliar decade.

Also returning will be Robin Wright as Antiope, known as the greatest warrior in the history of the Amazons, and Connie Nielsen as Amazon queen Hippolyta. Though we're excited to see those characters once again, if you're up on the events of the last film, those appearances are most likely to be made through a series of flashbacks.

Given her successful debut, *Wonder Woman 1984* has a lot to live up to but the second that iconic music kicks in and we catch a glimpse of Wonder Woman's bullet time reflexes, it seems all the excess of the Eighties will be nothing Diana Prince can't handle.

WONDER WOMAN 1984 is currently scheduled for release on August 14th.





HORROR,
MONSTER,
SUPERHERO,
APOCALYPSE:

MOVIES IN TIMES OF CRISIS

by Laura Potler



Metropolis



Nosferatu

Films usually serve as one of two things: a means of escape or a means of confronting fears and processing trauma. Often the two are not mutually exclusive, and instead work in tandem as a two-step healing process. For example, in the wake of the Red Scare and McCarthyism came films about alien invasions and pod people; the consumerist age of the eighties saw films rebelling against traditional values and presenting a much darker view of youth – the vicious comedy *Heathers* (1988) being a prime example; the computer age led to a wave of films exploring the meaning of free will, existentialism, and our own obsolescence.

Turning to movies in times of crisis is a common means of processing traumatic events and, equally, films will tend to engage with contemporary concerns. After all, isn't the symbiotic relationship between entertainment and current events one of the most potent influences on culture? Here, *STARBURST* explores how movies engaged with times of dramatic social revolution and crisis at three historical junctures: the rise of horror movies after World War I, the popularity of monster features in the early years of the Cold War, and the rise of the superhero film after the September 11th attacks.

Learning from these trends, what then can we anticipate from movies once the Covid-19 pandemic is behind us? What film genre will proliferate, and will the movie industry opt for escapism or will it embrace the fears and anxieties that gripped the world?

"The Cosmic Vampire That Has Sucked the Blood of Millions"

– Albin Grau, dir. *Nosferatu*.

The War, Death, and Mutilated Bodies in Horror Cinema

Our fascination with macabre far precedes the Great War, of course. Just look at the incredible success of late 18th and 19th-century literary works by Shelly, Stoker and Poe. 'Horror films' too have been around almost as long as the motion picture itself, but many of the specific images and themes that we associate with the movie genre today were born out of the horrors of World War I. Dismemberment, mutilation, the total brutalisation of the body to a point when it's barely recognisable as human, these were brought home from the battlefields to be immortalised and relived, over and over on the silver screen. The war forever changed the way we understood death, and with it a new language of horror was created.

Not only did World War I reverse the narrative of death as the plight of the old by sending millions of young, healthy men to die on the front lines, new technologies also transformed the very appearance of death. The use of air raids, chemical warfare, and explosive shells turned soldiers' bodies into sites of violent horror. The line between life and death also became blurred, as the dead and living were forced to inhabit the same trenches, to be buried and dug up together in a sickeningly intimate cycle.

This loss of clear boundaries was exacerbated by the impossibility



of burial and mourning rites. Mass graves populated by the unidentifiable bodies and body parts of soldiers and civilians shattered 19th-century romanticisations of death and seemed to flout basic beliefs about the sanctity of human life. The cultural vacuum it left behind was haunted by images of death from which returning soldiers and civilians alike had no possible closure. In its place, horror cinema stepped up to offer a new language for trauma, a way to excise demons from individual memory and from group consciousness alike.

It's no coincidence that so many of the leading horror auteurs of the post-war era were veterans of the Great War. At the heart of German expressionist cinema and Hollywood's 'Universal Horror' classics were the likes of Fritz Lang (*Metropolis*, 1927), F.W. Murnau and Albin Grau (*Nosferatu*, 1922), Paul Wegener (*The Golem*, 1915), and James Whale (*Frankenstein*, 1931 and *Bride of Frankenstein*, 1935), all of whom had served on the front lines during the war.

Each of these era-defining movies dealt with imagery and themes from the war. For instance, we see in *Metropolis* a society where workers are more like machines than human beings. *Frankenstein's* monster was created from nameless donors' dismembered limbs, forming a literal graveyard of human bodies, and *The Golem* confused the boundaries between life, animation and inanimation. Likewise, in horror films like Paul Leni's *Waxworks* (1924) or Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), men are reduced to automata, bodies denied their own agency or humanity. These films cemented the muddled understanding of the body and of death that veterans had to reckon with on the battlefield.

The war turned the dread and unease surrounding 19th-century Gothic ideas of the uncanny into historical reality. Automata, puppets, and man-made beings coming to life, disfigured monsters, and revenant armies became popular horror staples – most notably in one of the era's first great horror films, Abel Gance's *J'accuse* (1919), in which an army of deceased French fighters rise from the dead to remind the local population of their sacrifice and suffering. Gance remembers the army, played by 2000 real soldiers, had "come straight from the Front... [and] were due back eight days later. They played the dead knowing that in all probability they'd be dead themselves before long. Within a few weeks of their return, eighty percent had been killed."

The Great War turned horror into reality: men into casualties, the dead into corpses devoid of identity, survivors into husks of themselves as shell shock tormented them long after they returned home. The war had made death synonymous with violent, dehumanising horror, and horror cinema became a new language of trauma through which veterans and civilians could come to understand this new, post-war world.

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Keep Worrying About the Bomb and Love Monster Features

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 would provoke a shift in how humanity imagined itself. Western culture was – and arguably still is – based on a belief in the survival of human civilisation in spite of individual mortality. The realisation that nuclear destruction could wipe out swathes of the human race was, of course, a source of profound fear, but equally insidious were fears of the long-term effects of radioactive fallout on the human genome. The slow, invisible poisoning of survivors had the potential to transmute the human species to one no longer recognisable as our own.

In the early 1950s, before the Cuban Missile Crisis bolstered the comforting promise of Mutually Assured Destruction as the Cold War tagline (comforting, because you're probably less inclined to bomb your enemy if they promise to obliterate you in return), the public was starting to be made aware of the dangers of nuclear fallout. Atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons in Utah and Nevada revealed the dangers of widespread contamination, as did the Lucky Dragon incident of '54, where an American test spread lethal levels of fallout over more than 7000 square miles and poisoned the crew of a Japanese fishing boat.

And so, with fears of the consequences of fallout at the forefront of people's minds, it's no big surprise that the sci-fi monster feature subgenre became especially popular in the fifties. Films such as *Them!* (1954), *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955), and *Godzilla* (1954) became increasingly appealing to viewers as an expression of their own nuclear anxieties. Harnessing these fears led Hollywood to release over 500 sci-fi features between 1948 and 1962. Some of the best-known and critically acclaimed genre films of this period include *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) and *Tarantula!* (1955), alongside a host of B-movie hits like *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957), *The Cyclops* (1957), and *The Alligator People* (1959). What unites these movies is fairly straightforward: they all tell stories of monsters unintentionally awakened or birthed by nuclear experiments, and their ensuing rampage against humans. Let's just say that The Rock would have done very well for himself in '50s Hollywood.

What's most telling of the effect of nuclear fears on cinema is the complete denial of pathos for these monsters. Whereas Depression-era monsters easily gained audiences' sympathy – Dracula had a cool and campy appeal, and didn't we all cry when King Kong was killed? – the Cold War 'Other' was cold-blooded, mechanical, completely alien, an on-



Frankenstein



J'accuse



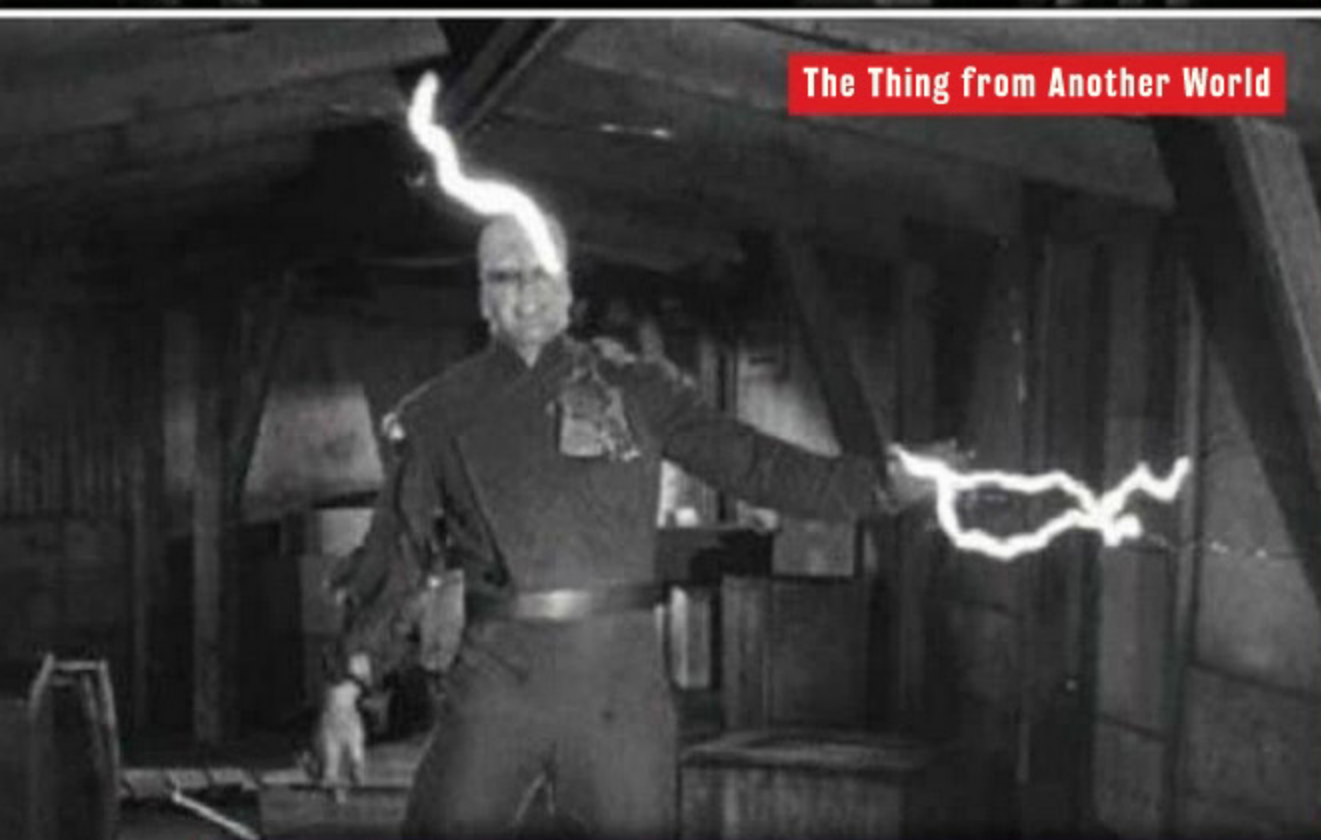
Them!



Attack of the Crab Monsters



The Alligator People



The Thing from Another World



The Avengers

the-nose allegory for the Communist enemy. More than that, allowing the monsters moral complexity would make them manageable because they are understandable, whereas the fear of nuclear annihilation that it reflects is terrifying precisely because it is unknown, invisible, and more often than not, beyond understanding. An enemy with a cause can be reasoned with, an enemy intent on destruction for its own sake cannot.

On the other hand, while monster features embraced fears of the effects of radiation and the 'Other', it also emphasised the role of technology as a saving force in the hands of the 'good guys'. *Tarantula!*'s mutated arachnids are killed with napalm, electricity kills the alien in *The Thing from Another World*, the monster in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* is killed with a radioactive isotope, an atomic torpedo destroys the giant octopus in *It Came from Beneath the Sea*. As film historian Peter Biskind stated, "where science caused the problem, science often solved it too"; like any tool, science is neither good nor bad, and its actions depend only on whoever wields it.

What this accomplished was to crystallise public paranoia against the enemy and to reinforce the idea of the Cold War as a necessary stand against evil. Monster movies dehumanised the 'Other' and placed the heroes (read: America) on the side of moral goodness. 'Sure, you should be scared of the nuclear bomb, but only when in the hands of the enemy!' these films seemed to say. They were reactionary, refusing to challenge existing social narratives or question the existence of the conflict, and were instead content to make big bucks exploiting the public's fear and distrust.

The Many Battles of New York: 9/11 and the Rise of Superheroes on the Big Screen

It has been almost two decades since 2,977 people were killed in the biggest terror attack in United States history, and Americans have been trying to process this trauma ever since. 9/11 imagery, from shaky camera footage of terrified survivors covered in ash to the unforgettable vision of the two shattered skyscrapers, became a visceral language for chaos.

The two years following the September 11th attacks saw movies almost entirely devoid of images of destruction; the gleeful pandemonium of '90s films (just think of *Independence Day* or *Armageddon*) ended overnight. Footage of the World Trade Centre was retroactively erased from many upcoming films including *Spider-Man*, *Zoolander*, and *Men in Black II*, so painful was the visual memory of the Twin Towers.

What emerged post-2001 was the unprecedented rise of the superhero genre on the big screen. It's no surprise that superheroes held a newfound appeal in this time, moving from comic bookstore shelves and onto the centre stage of mainstream entertainment. Since they were first popularised in the 1930s, superheroes have served as sites of political and social reflection, from Wonder Woman as a vehicle for first and second-wave feminist discussion, to the conflicts of the X-Men as a metaphor for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Post-9/11, superhero movies came to serve a new function: to shield Americans from their newly exposed vulnerability. As a crutch for their imagined identity and a source of comfort in a time of heightened anxiety and political polarisation, superheroes became a way for American viewers to excise their fear. There is no example of this more obvious than Joss Whedon's *The Avengers*, in which the climactic battle of New York between Loki and the Avengers is essentially a reimagining of the events of September 11th.

The World Trade Centre becomes Stark Tower, the hijacked planes become aliens descending from the skies and flying into the city's skyscrapers. We see people falling from buildings, debris crashing onto the streets and blanketing New Yorkers in dust. All these parallels are made crystal clear, and what follows is a therapeutic rewriting of one of the darkest moments in American history. The Stark tower stays standing, civilians are taken out of harm's way by Earth's Mightiest Heroes, and when Loki throws Tony Stark from the top of his building, Stark calls on the Iron Man suit and saves himself, in a strangely comforting reimagining of Richard Drew's *The Falling Man*.

The Avengers is hardly the first or last film to do this. Since 2001, New York has been attacked and saved in the likes of *Spider-Man* (2002), *Fantastic Four* (2005), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), and *Deadpool* (2016).



Contagion

From a pop-psychology perspective, this repetition looks remarkably similar to the kinds of clinical treatment used for trauma patients, in which the re-enactment and rewriting of events helps give victims a sense of control over what happened, and helps them to process and heal from said trauma. Superhero films took a time when Americans felt most vulnerable and least in control and repurposed the narrative into one of empowerment and perseverance, complete with a (more or less) happy ending.

What comes next? Pandemics and the climate crisis in dystopian science-fiction.

So now, how will our experience of the pandemic inform the kind of content coming out of the film industry in the near future? Covid-19 has laid bare many of modern society's most fundamental failings, from an increased awareness of socio-economic inequalities and the failures of capitalism, to the incompetence of right-wing governments and their money-first approach to the value of human life. It would, therefore, be no surprise to see a wave of cross-genre movies with big corporations and capitalist governments as villains, favouring wealth and economic growth over human life. Likewise, it would be straightforward enough to anticipate a rise in *Contagion* (2011)-like medical dramas, zombie films, and other pandemic-related sci-fi narratives akin to *12 Monkeys* (1995), most likely in the cathartic style of superhero films.

Yet we foresee a more interesting

and important development in science fiction movies, inspired by both our collective experience of the pandemic and global climate anxiety. Scientists have linked the increasing rate of pandemics to human actions encroaching on natural habitats, leading to the cross-species transmission of viruses. From Ebola, SARS, bird flu, and now coronavirus, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that three in four new diseases affecting humans originate in wildlife. This inextricably links the increased risk of pandemics in an interconnected world to the climate emergency.

In the face of these 'invisible enemies', the anticipated cinematic reaction will likely most resemble what we saw during the 1950s. The invisible enemy (the disease) will be manifested into something more tangible, an enemy with a face. As a result, expect stories of dystopian societies with one of two types of villain: the insatiable capitalist elite, à la *Handmaid's Tale*, *Snowpiercer* (2013), *Gattaca* (1997), or *The Hunger Games* (2012), or an enemy that's recognisably monstrous, like zombies in *Train to Busan* (2016) and *World War Z* (2013) or alien creatures in *A Quiet Place* (2018) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978).

Simultaneously, growing anxiety about the loss of biodiversity, the depletion of resources and the severity of natural disasters will see changes in what post-apocalyptic worlds look like. Just like World War I gave death a new face, so too the climate crisis lends a new look to the post-apocalyptic vision. It's likely that science fiction films will increasingly use backdrops of a crumbling, barren and exhausted planet, much like what we've already seen in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and *Interstellar* (2014) rather than a world that's been transformed in a catastrophic event, like an EMP bomb or alien invasion.

It may sound a little grim, but perhaps that's exactly the sort of film landscape we need to see in order to confront our own complacency about the state of our planet, and work towards a future that doesn't involve sending Matthew McConaughey into space to save our asses.

We'll just have to wait and see. ✦



12 Monkeys



The Hunger Games



The Handmaid's Tale



REVIEWS

THE LATEST HOME
VIDEO RELEASES
REVIEWED & RATED



THE HUNT

DVD, VOD • CERT: 15 • DIRECTOR: CRAIG ZOBEL • SCREENPLAY: NICK CUSE, DAMON LINDELOF • STARRING: BETTY GILPIN, HILARY SWANK, EMMA ROBERTS • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW (DIGITAL RENTAL), JULY 6TH (HOME VIDEO)

The Hunt, produced by the increasingly influential Blumhouse Productions, sets out its stall from the get-go: we're introduced to a group of liberal snobs on a private jet, while a young gentleman is complaining that caviar is the only snack available on the aircraft, a deliriously heavy-set man comes bounding out from the next compartment, an older man who says he is a doctor, attempts to calm him down by shoving a pen in his neck, blood spurting everywhere. Then, to confound his suffering, a stiletto is driven into his eye, ripping it clean out! Welcome to The Hunt, a fun, bloody, and not so subtle satire on American politics.

We discover that the plane is carrying the victims of the eponymous hunt, with a group of 12 people waking up in the woods, complete with mouth gags. Unlike other films that feature 'victims waking up in a strange environment', such as the cerebral micro-budgeted Cube (1997), we've already

peaked behind the curtain and know who is hunting these people, but we don't know why. The victims find a box full of weapons and a pig, yes you read that right, and then we're away! The film delights in subverting our expectations, not letting the audience settle into a groove, or the main character, no one is safe from a hail of bullets or quiver of arrows. Eventually, we end on

Crystal (Glow's Betty Gilpin), a no-nonsense ex-soldier who works at a car rental company. In a blink and you miss her introduction, she is using her hair as a makeshift compass, foreshadowing her skills. A film like The Hunt needs a strong protagonist, somebody to root for, and Crystal is just that; she is brash, slightly disturbed but smart, a great strong female character (who would have

thought Blumhouse had it in them!).

The Hunt is co-written by Damon Lindelof, and his fingerprints are all over this, from the strange, unfolding mystery to the heavy-handed social commentary, the battlegrounds in America are set here for all to see, with liberal elites, looking down on conspiracy-loving conservatives, mainly from the southern states, concerned with gun laws and the myth of global warming. Fake news also turns out to be the underlying cause of this whole sordid affair - take that, society! Endings in such short and sharp films can be tricky and even though it's satisfactory, it isn't handled particularly well, after some Animal Farm references (remember the pig), which fall flat, we are offered a big reveal to the woman behind the insanity; yes, they managed to get an Oscar-winning actor. Still, one you likely will not have seen or thought about for a long time, and we are told she has trained for eight months for a final showdown but seems ill-prepared and happy for a level of chance to help her win; perhaps overconfidence got the better of her. You can't blame Lindelof for trying to inject some flavour into effectively what is a hack and slash affair, just a very skillfully crafted and entertaining one.

JACOB WALKER

+++++ 7





WHY DON'T YOU JUST DIE!

**BLU-RAY, VOD • CERT: 18 • DIRECTOR & SCREENPLAY: KIRILL SOKOLOV
STARRING: ALEXANDER KUZNETSOV, EVGENIYA KREGZHDE, VITALIY
KHAYEV, MICHAEL GOR, ELENA SHEVCHENKO • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW**

What do you get when you mix Quentin Tarantino and Guy Ritchie with a creative dose of Edgar Wright? You get Kirill Sokolov's *Why Don't You Just Die!*, of course!

The film follows the chaotic events surrounding Matvey, who is asked by his girlfriend

to kill her father, Andrey, who committed heinous acts upon her. When Matvey arrives at the apartment of his lover's parents, shit truly hits the fan as an all-out blood-soaked battle ensues between them. However, as Andrey continues to defy human nature and

consistently get up after the beating he takes, secrets and true colours are revealed as not everyone is who they seem. Throughout the runtime, we get interspersed sections of narrative revealing new character traits for those who get caught up in this web of deceit, corruption, and gore.

Independent cinema is always restricted by a lot of factors, primarily location and budget, so when a filmmaker uses the limitations to their advantage to create an incredible blend of action, comedy, and dark, twisted humour that rivals that of any big studio production, you have one hell of a film on your hands.

Director Kirill Sokolov has said that Tarantino is an icon in Russian cinema, and he takes all the best of the legendary filmmaker and puts his own spin on it, with inventive camera work, powerful action set-pieces and a compelling story that keeps you invested from the first frame. Every single punch and weapon strike hits you,

the audience, with the force of a massive truck as much as it does the characters on screen.

Why Don't You Just Die! is a masterclass of filmmaking that should be used in film school when teaching on how to make the most with very little. We fully expect to see Sokolov continue to excel in this field (considering that he wrote, directed, and edited the film) and we can't wait to see what he does next.

JAMES PERKINS

+++++ 9



SWEETHEART

**VOD • CERT: 15 • DIRECTOR: J.D. DILLARD • SCREENPLAY: J.D. DILLARD, ALEX
HYNER, ALEX THEURER • STARRING: KIERSEY CLEMONS, ANDREW CRAWFORD,
EMORY COHEN • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW**

As Blumhouse's *Sweetheart*, from *Sleight* director J.D. Dillard comes to our shores, it brings with it a wave of enthusiastic festival responses and some exciting opinions from its showings stateside. Aquatic horror is already making a strong comeback (after the excellent *Underwater* and *Sea Fever*), and in Dillard's film, something terrific this way comes.

After their boat sinks in a fierce storm, Jenn (Clemons) and her wounded friend Brad (Samuel) wash up on the shores of a tropical island. As Jenn seeks out the tools to survive, bigger problems lie out at sea, and when night falls something in the ocean continues to come ashore...

and it's hungry.

Sweetheart is a fiercely suspenseful survival tale, which takes its time to develop its lead character, its simple but superb story, and to unveil its water-dwelling menace. If you were to mesh *Creature From the Black Lagoon* with *Predator* it gives you an inkling what to expect from this absolute gem; it's a treasure in this genre that we urge you to seek out. Dillard's film is atmospheric in its build-up and superbly crafted, but is made even better by the humanity at its heart, emanating from an outstanding lead in Kiersey Clemons.

As Jenn, Clemons is put through an absolute ordeal but her physical grit-filled

performance is one that immediately strikes you. The resilient and resourceful nature of Jenn makes all the difference, as she encounters the unrestrained malevolence of nature and the deepest darkest depths of the sea but makes logical decisions and refreshingly wise ones. As this story progresses at a fantastically methodical pace, like the lapping waves on the shore of this paradise-turned-nightmare, we find more out about Jenn. As her past is hinted at and the story takes on a more personal turn, this is really her moment to finally stand up and fight the darkness that has threatened to takeover her life.

Dillard's feature has teeth in so many respects but none more so than in how it respects its creature. Sure there are flashes of shock throughout (including one of the best jump scares in recent memory), but this is mostly a film reliant on slow reveals of its original and hugely impressive creature. Behind the masterful practical and part-CG FX, Andrew Crawford as the creature gives this predator an imposing and spectacular film presence. One that shakes you and compels you in equal measure.

It takes some time for the monster's full and rightfully proud reveal but the first flare-lit night-time glimpse is a chilling piece of horror

filmmaking and one of many moments of engrossing cinematography by Stefan Duscio. The island setting is the perfect backdrop, and as the mythos of the creature builds through hints, you feel up to your waist in the film's atmosphere and the score by Charles Scott IV only assists in this feeling.

Boldly dialogue-free for long stretches and all the better for this approach, when a development later on requires more speech, there is admittedly a clunky line or two, but *Sweetheart* never sinks and continues to swim all the way up to its big finale. A finale that does come together that bit quicker, and the partly ambiguous finish could have been a touch more dastardly. However, there is a lingering point here that you make up your own mind on the later events, as Dillard caps his story confidently and powerfully and leaves the rest up to fate and nature.

Sweetheart is an absolute must see. A beautifully shot and made aquatic monster horror that is short yet taut and achieves that ultimate accolade all films of this kind hope for, having a fantastic character facing an amazing monster. A future classic of its kind.

JACK BOTTOMLEY

+++++ 9



TROLLS WORLD TOUR

VOD, DVD, BLU-RAY • CERT: U • DIRECTOR: WALT DOHRN • STARRING: ANNA KENDRICK, JUSTIN TIMBERLINE, RACHEL BLOOM, JAMES CORDEN, ANDERSON PAAK, RON FUNCHES, KELLY CLARKSON, SAM ROCKWELL
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW (DIGITAL RENTAL), JULY 27TH (HOME VIDEO)

It isn't being too harsh to say that the idea of a sequel to DreamWorks' all-singing all-dancing Trolls was not exactly what everyone really, really wanted. And yet here we are playing that funky music... and it isn't bad.

The film catches up with the trolls as optimistic Queen Poppy (Kendrick) and her friends find that their world is bigger than they ever thought. Split into different kingdoms, based around genres of music, Poppy realises

this once united world is now divided, as each realm faces the threat of invasion from Queen Barb (Bloom) of the Rock Trolls, who aims to rock them like a hurricane! But is Poppy taking this threat seriously enough?

Trolls World Tour re-covers some old ground (finding love in unexpected places; the power of music comes from within) and some lines of dialogue are seriously creaky, with the odd jokes worthy of an 'oh no you didn't'. However, the film

successfully widens the onscreen lore of Trolls, incorporating everything from rock and classical to yodelling and K-pop and everything in-between. Like the LSD-taking lesser cousin of Zootropolis, this one is a rather visually creative crazy train and commendably determined in the pursuit of its message's good vibrations. World Tour's mantra of embracing and celebrating our differences is obvious from the start, but that doesn't make it unimportant. The film says that we all have a heart and the sweet emotion that comes from that heart can unite us: our passions, our interests, our cultures and, most crucially, our identities, because if we are all forced to be the same, how can we come together and harmonise?

It's an inoffensive film and a few adults may get a kick out of the film's 'pop ruins everything' sly gag. Not to sound toxic here, but by the end, you've had your fill of glittery relentless cheer but it keeps you watching, if for no other reason than its wild animation. The visuals are amplified by 11 from the first movie. Constantly crazy and assuredly colourful, although adults be warned, do not watch this film after partaking in lots of alcohol (or any substance - tsk tsk) because hell's bells, this is seriously trippy stuff, man! A

glitter troll giving birth from his head, live-action newspaper clippings, intoxicated jazz fever dreams... it's madness.

For a film about music, some of its soundtrack is fleeting and while there are tunes here to get your toe-tapping and a few twists on classic earworms, there isn't a bunch of new tracks that will rule the world. Probably won't stop some youngsters feeling happy though.

While there are fun characters, aside from Kendrick's Poppy and Timberlake's Branch, we can't say that you'll come away remembering your Biggie from your Delta Dawn, but Ozzy Osbourne's delightful self-deprecating rock bad guy dad King Thrash certainly stands out, as do some other star voices like Sam Rockwell and Jamie Dornan.

Trolls World Tour won't win over many who are set to avoid it like the plague, but in these trying times, the kids might get a kick out of this visual feast that celebrates our differences and promotes a crazy little thing called love at a point when many folks just might need a positive boost.

JACK BOTTOMLEY

+++++ 6



BUSTER KEATON: 3 FILMS [VOL.2]

BLU-RAY • DIRECTORS: BUSTER KEATON, DONALD CRISP
STARRING: BUSTER KEATON • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Well, what do you know, those sparkling fine folk at Eureka! have proffered up a new 3-disc selection of films on Blu-ray by the slapstick OG, BK (as no one is calling him).

Let's start from the off by saying that everything looks glorious. Taken, as they are, from 4K restorations, each film looks incredibly crisp. Indeed, one could be forgiven for thinking

each film was a modern, shot-for-shot remake based on the depth of the visual information. While there may be small dips in quality regarding narrative and comedy across the three films, the transfers are a sight to behold and a huge nod to the restoration team behind this release. Each restoration is taken from various A and B negatives from the Cohen archives and a sweet touch

about the presentation is the two paragraphs at the start of each film explaining which elements were used and how. This adds to the overall feeling of watching a cinematic historical document that needs, nay, 'should' be kept for future posterity.

There is little that can be said of the man himself that hasn't been said before, however, his run of films as actor and director between 1920 and 1929 elevate him to the status of a god. Alongside Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd, Keaton sits squarely in the middle. Not quite the dramatic derring-do of Lloyd and sadly not nearly as narratively timeless as Chaplin, Keaton's oft-repeated themes of marriage and wealthy inheritance may stick in the craw of some viewers, as will the racial stereotyping (though blessedly, Keaton did use actors of colour to fill these roles).

The Navigator is a tale of unrequited love that becomes, well, requited after Rollo and Betsy (Keaton and Kathryn McGuire) spend weeks marooned on a ship-that-is-not-wrecked. The two highlights are a long 'opening opposite doors' scene while the two try to find each other - something seen every week in Scooby-Doo, and the

other is the underwater sequence. It is a well-known fact that underwater scenes often slow a film to a sea-snail's pace (Thunderball, anyone?), but this cracks along swiftly with brilliant sight gags.

Battling Butler is a classic mistaken identity story that has been rolled out so many times since that it's easy to forget its early cinematic genius. Perhaps the most startling element of this film is the way Keaton's character, a rich and spoiled dandy, decides to marry a very young-looking country girl without so much as consulting her in the matter. Aside from that, imbibe yourself in the glorious wash of sepia it is presented in.

Seven Chances employs the old 'inheritance with a catch' plotline, that the viewer should let wash over them and instead bathe in the escalating set-pieces that Keaton excelled in.

Come for the films and stay for the brilliance of the restoration work, a rare release for all ages - so let's hear it for the SS OG, BK, OK?

LUKE SPAFFORD

+++++ 10



THE YEAR OF THE SEX OLYMPICS (1968)

DVD • CERT: 15 • DIRECTOR: MICHAEL ELLIOTT
SCREENPLAY: NIGEL KNEALE • STARRING:
LEONARD ROSSITER, TOBY VOGEL, BRIAN COX,
SUZANNE NEVE • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

In the future depicted here, society is stratified into the hi-drives and the low-drives. The hi-drives produce repetitive, lowbrow media content for the low-drives to uncritically consume, with the aim of keeping society pacified. Nat Mender (Vogel) works on one such show, 'Sex Sports', in which contestants are judged on their sexual abilities, the true aim being to satisfy the audience's sexual urges so they don't procreate and the population is kept from growing. But Nat's not satisfied with this over-controlled life, and when a colleague goes rogue and broadcasts provocative art, he's inspired to make a change, pitching a show in which he and partner Deanie (Neve) live in the wild 'like the before times' as an excuse to get away from it all.

As if *Black Mirror* were produced 50 years early, it's high-concept, cynical sci-fi, and extremely prescient; writer Nigel Kneale was ahead of his time in his prediction of reality TV, and it's amazing how familiar this world feels to those of us unfortunate enough to have tuned into an episode of *Big Brother* or *Love Island*. While it moves towards a seriously grim final act, it also has a sharp sense of humour, particularly in the other shows glimpsed such as erotica 'ArtSex' and eating/fighting contest 'The Hungry Angry Show'. There are strong supporting turns from Leonard Rossiter as the TV station's conflicted controller and Brian Cox as an increasingly psychotic director who delights in his control of both contestants and audience, even if some of the other supporting cast come across too theatrical by today's standards.

The highlight of the extras is *Le Pétomane*, a half-hour comedy starring Rossiter as Joseph Pujol, a fart-based impressionist who wowed crowds at the Moulin Rouge. Essentially half an hour of fart jokes, it's vastly different to *Sex Olympics* in tone, but it works as a palate cleanser if the main feature has left you feeling down.

KIERON MOORE

+++++ 9



THE MAD MAGICIAN (1954)

BLU-RAY • CERT: PG • DIRECTOR: JOHN BRAHM
SCREENPLAY: CRANE WILBUR • STARRING:
VINCENT PRICE, MARY MURPHY, EVA GABOR,
PATRICK O'NEAL • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

The *Mad Magician* tells the story of Don Gallico (Price), magician, master of disguise, and inventor of stage effects that wow the late 19th century audiences that come to the shows of big stars like The Great Rinaldi. Gallico wants to take to the stage himself but is thwarted by the contract he has with businessman Ross Ormond, which effectively means everything Gallico creates, Ormond owns and can sell off to the likes of Rinaldi to present as their own ideas. Events conspire to ensure Don snaps and a murderous campaign of revenge follows.

Made and released a year after Price's first big horror hit, *House of Wax*, this was also presented in 3D. Directed with solid style by the reliable John Brahm, it's an entertaining tale of frustrated ambition and homicidal rage. Although Price gives his usual committed performance, there's less to it than Andre DeToth's colourful classic. But that doesn't stop it being a worthwhile part of Price's villainous portfolio of characters and you'll find much to enjoy here.

This new release presents the film in fine form. A 2K restoration shows off the crisp black and white photography and is as clear and sharp as you could hope for, and there's both 3D and 2D versions. A good selection of extras complement the main feature: we start with a brand-new audio commentary from film historians Kevin Lyons and Jonathan Rigby. There's an appreciation of the 3D boom, as well as a Super 8 version of the film. Two short films from *The Three Stooges* are also presented in 2D and 3D. The limited edition first run also includes a booklet with essays and guides to the promotional material and reviews from the time it was released.

For a Price film that isn't frequently discussed when talk turns to his horror output, this is a rounded and thoughtful package. If you're a fan of Vincent, then consider it an essential addition to your collection.

JAMES EVANS

+++++ 7



THE IRON MASK

BLU-RAY, VOD • CERT: PG • DIRECTOR: OLEG STEPCHENKO • STARRING: JACKIE CHAN, ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER, RUTGER HAUSER, CHARLES DANCE • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Cine-masochists and trash film fanatics may find much to love in *The Iron Mask*, as it hurls viewers through a frazzled, CG laden, sick-tinted spiral into ancient China. An exposition-stuffed narration bombards our noggins with context that, when combined with the visual assault, bamboozles from the outset. Yet, as it progresses, it retains a car crash quality that makes it oddly captivating - but for all the wrong reasons.

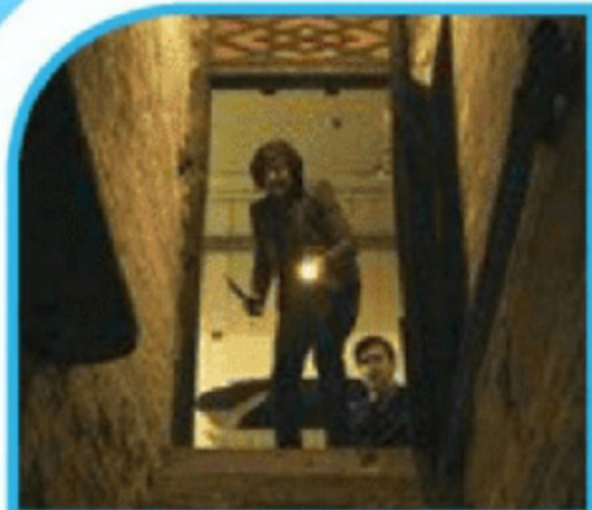
Set in the 1700s, it sees Jason Flemyng's drippy cartographer/scientist Jonathan Green being tasked to map Russia's Far East, before getting embroiled in a plot involving a mystical royal cover-up. Meanwhile, Jackie Chan's wispy-chinned 'Master' is imprisoned in the Tower of London, along with the titular Russian Tsar who claims to be Charles the 1st. They plot to escape, but have to overcome a Schwarzenegger-sized obstacle in the guise of Arnold's rambunctious James Hook, donned in panto fancy dress garb.

Stepchenko's film is crammed with kung fu, mad barons, miffed wizards, an international quest for healing tea and a 'dragon with massive eyebrows'. That said, it still miraculously manages to be mind-numbingly dull; quasi-lobotomising viewers as though subjecting them to a defective hypnosis video. It gets by on unintentional WTF moments, bizarre camaraderie, cleft characters, playful imagination, and relentless ridiculousness, but its shambolic cragginess could reduce audiences to bleeding from the eyes, brain, and soul out of boredom.

The first half is fun but there's still a good third that's colossally bungled, appallingly acted fantasy nonsense that's frowzy to the point of almost being abstract. It's often propped up with vibrant bravado but has sets that seem on the cusp of toppling and digitally twitching creatures that looked banged out by accident in five minutes.

DANIEL GOODWIN

+++++ 4



AN ENGLISH HAUNTING

DVD, VOD • CERT: 15
 DIRECTOR: CHARLIE STEEDS
 STARRING: DAVID LENIK, TESSA WOOD, BARRINGTON DE LA ROCHE
 RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

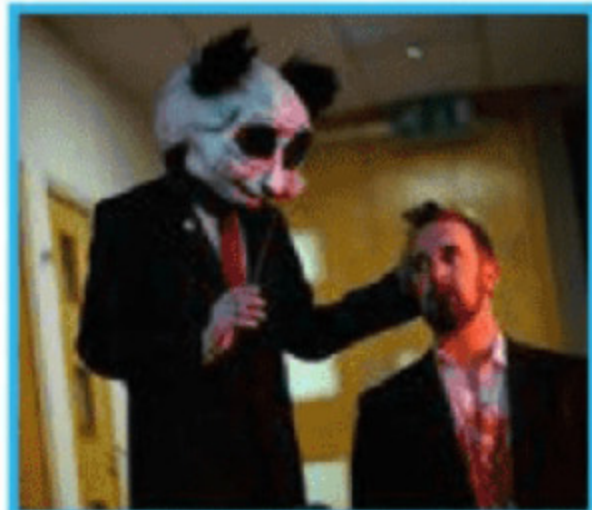
A young man and his mother move into his grandfather's mansion to care for him after the nurse leaves under mysterious circumstances in Charlie Steeds' terrific haunted house tale, *An English Haunting*. As far as ghostly haunted house movies go, the set up is simple: a character moves into the house to care for relative or has been left said house by a deceased relative, strange things begin to occur before the true evil of the house is revealed. However, what sets this particular film apart from its peers is a stunningly eerie and beautiful location that is used to the fullest potential, and some expert direction by Steeds allowing the viewers to truly grasp the scope of the world within the confines of the walls and grounds.

The score is equally as chilling as the phenomenal presentation. From violin-led pieces to suitably unearthly ambience, everything involved makes it incredibly effective; every frame oozes atmosphere and flair. At the centrepiece of this affair is David Lenik's brilliant performance as Blake Cunningham, who is the lead character thrust into the haunted house by his scheming mother who has more than caring for her father on her mind.

David Lenik's shy at first yet ultimately fiery portrayal of Blake shows off his character's relationship strain with his mother to devastatingly powerful effect, allowing him and the rest of the film to pace along nicely. This all adds to the fact that it manages to successfully avoid re-treading the same ground as other ghost stories, and creates an incredibly well made tale that showcases just how superb British independent filmmaking can be.

JAMES PERKINS

+++++ 8



PANDAMONIUM

DVD, VOD • CERT: 15
 DIRECTOR: M.J. DIXON
 STARRING: ORIANA CHARLES, DAVID HON MA CHU
 RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

It's Arielle's first day at top law-firm Killmore and Percival, a day that marks a fresh start for the ex-stripper whose keen to get away from a life surrounded by sex-crazed chauvinist pigs. Unfortunately for her, she winds up on the Sixth Floor, surrounded by men that make Harvey Weinstein look like Mister Tumble. As the lads settle in for a drink and drug-fuelled office party (complete with high-class exotic dancers), Arielle does her best to make a good impression while keeping out of their way. Then a psychopathic quick-witted guy in a panda mask turns up and makes mincemeat out of them, one by one.

Pandamonium marks the 8th release in director M.J. Dixon's shared universe horror and it's clear to see that the micro-budget filmmaker is really starting to own the genre. What stands out best is the script, blending Arielle's pathos-filled journey with a very '90s-feeling stalk and slash (with a ton of purposefully cringy one-liners from panda-head). As ever, Dixon also manages to walk the careful line of writing strong female characters, while ensuring they more often than not end up on the end of the slasher's blade.

Being a low-budget film does come with understandable drawbacks, though, and you'll have to forgive some of the less than stellar performances from a few of the cast (generally the smaller roles suffer the worst). Likewise, the editing could be a touch tighter and the cinematography a little slicker, but since Dixon covers all creative basis on his productions, there's plenty of slack afforded. What remains is a very entertaining tour-de-force in low budget horror that ticks all the right boxes and leaves you wanting more.

DAMON KELLY

+++++ 8



BUTT BOY

VOD • CERT: 15
 DIRECTOR & SCREENPLAY: TYLER CORNACK • STARRING: TYLER CORNACK, TYLER RICE
 RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

During a routine prostate exam, bored IT drone Chip (writer and director Cornack) discovers an unexpected kink that he never knew he had. Not that there's anything wrong with shoving things up your asshole for kicks, but it kind of depends on what you're forcing up there. When his wife refuses to play, Chip is forced to look elsewhere for stimulation. Enter detective Russell Fox (Tyler Rice), who meets and befriends Chip at Alcoholics Anonymous. When Russell is called to investigate a missing child, he begins to suspect that there's more to Chip's addictions than meet the eye. You see where this is heading? Yeah, up Chip's arse, along with the remote control, some missing children, and a number of neighbourhood pets. And Russell is determined to get to the bottom of it.

Such body horror is rare outside of the extreme end of Japanese cinema, and so one must applaud the film's co-writer, director and star for *Butt Boy*'s bravery. Cornack pulls a whole thriller from out of Chip's bumhole – and a compelling one, at that. There's a dry sense of humour to the writing, which otherwise plays the story straight – more film noir than exploitation horror. It looks and sounds great too; one of the sharpest, slickest low-budget genre movies in years. That dedication means the film's one joke never gets old, and *Butt Boy* mostly sustains its conceit to the end. And what an end! Like a surprisingly fun rectal exam, *Butt Boy* is an unexpected treat. Of wit and atmospherics, it has piles. From its bizarre conceit, it derives one of the oddest, most charming genre movies of the year. Not bad for a one-joke body horror flick about a serial killer stuffing live children up his ass.

JOEL HARLEY

+++++ 6



BLOODSHOT

DVD, BLU-RAY, VOD • CERT: 15
 DIRECTOR: DAVID S.F. WILSON
 SCREENPLAY: JEFF WADLOW
 STARRING: VIN DIESEL
 RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

The superhero genre doesn't need new heroes. It needs new stories. Throwing franchise favourites into unfamiliar territory speaks more to the appeal of these adventures than cramming in new personalities does. Unfortunately, the genre's newest addition delivers neither. Enter Valiant Entertainment's *Bloodshot*, an earnest translation of superior source material, a decidedly lackluster Vin Diesel flick, and an excellent example of how to botch characters and plots. A ramshackle film bogged down by its own ambition, *Bloodshot* disappoints.

The movie keeps its world small, a creative move that's both a boon and a bane for this misguided picture. Boon: director David S. F. Wilson purposefully matches the limited scope and scale of this world with Garrison's perception of and experience with that world. It's a smart choice and it keeps the characters focused and present. But the bane? Wilson seems to see action sequences as combat simulators, keeping important moments dark and disorienting. If your first instinct is to keep others in the dark, even with creative intent, you're better off screwing with people on *Call of Duty*. Just sayin'.

Wilson's directorial debut is more concerned with selling us on its concept than it is with having fun. Instead of punctuating its fight scenes with corny one-liners, the movie turns to the viewer, guns still blazing, and says, "This is cool, right?" The impulse is understandable. In a market packed with brand-boosted heroes and decades-old stories, drawing the curtain on a new character is terrifying. But when vying for moviegoers' attention, you'd better come correct. Unfortunately, *Bloodshot* doesn't rise to that challenge.

HAYDEN MEARS

+++++ 4



CODE 8

**NETFLIX ORIGINAL • DIRECTOR: JEFF CHAN • SCREENPLAY: CHRIS PARE
STARRING: ROBBIE AMELL, STEPHEN AMELL, SUNG KANG, ALEX MALLARI JNR
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW**

Connor Reed (Robbie Amell) is a 'Power' with electro-kinetic abilities, eking out a living from manual labour jobs and trying to support his sick mother who is suffering from brain cancer. He is enlisted by telekinetic mobster Garret Kelton (Stephen Amell) who recruits him in a series of heists and robberies that will

provide Connor with the money he needs to pay for his mother's treatment as well as making up the shortfall in the profits from a drug business run by Garret's sleazy boss. Garret tries to help Connor master his own abilities and encourages him to become more assertive in a world determined to grind him and his

like into the ground. But the pair's partnership and, particularly, Garret's associations, lead the pair into dangerous territory and Connor is forced to make difficult decisions about his own future as his mother's condition deteriorates and time begins to run out.

It would be easy to dismiss Code 8 as just a cheap and lazy X-Men rip-off, but the film's strength lies in its thoughtful characterisation, its well-realised vaguely-dystopian world, and a script that gives its characters room to breathe and develop as it explores its themes of a society where people aren't just good or bad but capable of great moral ambiguity for all sorts of reasons. Lincoln City, the faceless metropolis where the action takes place, is patrolled by huge flying drone aircraft which disgorge RoboCop-like android 'Guardians', and these sequences are where the money has been spent, resulting in a couple of impressive action scenes in which the drones sweep across the city and the Guardians indulge in combat with Garret's gang and assorted undesirables. Elsewhere, many of the effects – electric bolts and various bangs and flashes – are

very much the stuff of a modestly-funded TV series, but we're constantly reminded that they're really not the point of the film or the story; the point is we're getting involved in these people and we're genuinely invested in their world and the uncomfortable predicaments and moral dilemmas it throws up.

Code 8 isn't perfect, of course – it's a bit too relentlessly dour and humourless – but it does a remarkable job in bringing a believable alternative world to the screen on the sort of resources that would barely pay for the credit sequence in an X-Men movie, and yet it handles similar themes and ideas with considerably more intelligence and thoughtfulness than the last few desperate entries into the enduring Marvel mutant saga. There's enough potential here, in fact, for what's been described as a 'short-form' spin-off series for pointless short-attention-span streaming service Quibi, but we'll believe that when we see it.

PAUL MOUNT

+++++ 7



THE MAN WITH THE X-RAY EYES

**BLU-RAY • DIRECTOR: ROGER CORMAN • SCREENPLAY: ROGER DILLON
STARRING: RAY MILLAND, DIANA VAN DER VLIS • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW**

Ray Milland stars as Dr James Xavier, a scientist who develops a formula that can expand the human limits of sight beyond the visible spectrum. Despite warnings from his colleagues, Xavier uses himself as a test subject. The results exceeded his wildest expectations when he gains the ability to see through solid objects. Events soon spiral out of control, threatening his sanity, when his vision is extended beyond the realms of human comprehension.

After the success of AIP's

Poe adaptations, director Roger Corman wanted to do something different. He decided the project would be a contemporary set science fiction picture. The result was the officially titled 'X'. Interestingly, the title The Man with the X-Ray Eyes was used in the film's advertising.

Milland had worked with Corman before, and he is perfectly cast as Dr Xavier. Despite the film's low budget, Milland brings a gravitas to the role – playing the part seriously and with an earnest intensity.

This is not a mad scientist; rather, he is a scientist that made the mistake of being his own test subject. This allows the audience to empathise with Xavier's plight. The film is not without humour, though: during a party scene, Xavier bemusedly watches the partygoers dancing away in their naked glory. As this was 1963, it is naturally very coyly done.

Second Sight Films has created an exceptionally gorgeous Blu-ray. The transfer is a visual treat for the eyes. The colours are vibrant, and the sound is clear and distinctive. There is not a single scratch to be seen, nor a pop or crackle to be heard.

There's also a cornucopia of extras that are as compelling as the main feature. Director Roger Corman reminisces about the making of the film. He describes how X was comedian Don Rickles' first film, and how Rickles was so nervous he initially underplayed his role as a sideshow barker. He also describes how he allowed three or four takes to be done, and that he had a rehearsal schedule, which was a luxury for an AIP movie.

Writer Kat Ellinger describes how many of the film's themes have a religious allegory, being cast out of society, forced to wander the wasteland, which makes for illuminating viewing. Joe Dante waxes lyrical about

the film and even goes as far to say that The Man with the X-Ray Eyes is a film that would benefit from a remake, in terms of the themes that could be explored more fully, and how modern CGI could really do justice to the sights seen beyond the visible spectrum. Also included is a Trailers from Hell with Mick Garris who states that The Man with the X-Ray Eyes is his favourite Roger Corman film.

If you like commentaries, then you are well catered for, as Roger Corman does a deep dive into the making of the film, casting, filming in Spectarama, and there are plenty of anecdotes. Tim Lucas' commentary is more scholarly but no less interesting as he compares literary works to the film. Graham Humphrey's new artwork for the movie must also be mentioned, as it is simply gorgeous.

Modern audiences may find some of the scenes anachronistic (there's a lot of smoking in labs) but there's a power to this film that even after nearly six decades since its release, time has not been able to diminish. There's no hiding from the Man with the X-Ray Eyes, he'll see right through you.

CHRISTIAN JONES

+++++ 9



FANTASY ISLAND

DVD, BLU-RAY, VOD • CERT: 15 • DIRECTOR: JEFF WADLOW • SCREENPLAY: JEFF WADLOW, CHRIS ROACH, JILLIAN JACOBS • STARRING: MICHAEL PEÑA, MAGGIE Q, LUCY HALE, RYAN HANSEN, MICHAEL ROOKER, PORTIA DOUBLEDAY
RELEASE DATE: JULY 13TH

Director Jeff Wadlow's adaptation of the '70s television series is a rare darker take on the original iteration. While we've seen so many dark-and-gritty reboots on TV, it's certainly an intriguing proposition to take a four-decade-old property and turn it into a dark and twisted Twilight Zone-esque interpretation for the big screen.

Despite all this hullabaloo, the picture is basically fine. It's not terrible, but it's certainly nowhere near as interesting as the premise makes it out to be. First and foremost, with the exception of Maggie Q's Gwen Olsen, none of the characters exists as anything but broad sketches. Props to giving the film Jimmy O. Yang as Brax Weaver, an Asian character who is also gay. The film treats his desires and fantasies with just as much validity as those of his brother, J.D. (Hansen). Still, given that Hansen is essentially playing his Dick Casablancas character from *Veronica Mars*, that's not much of a grand stroke for LGBTQ rights.

Overall, *Fantasy Island* plays out like an overlong version of a television pilot. It's definitely a quarter of an hour too long, with far more time given to most of the various characters' fantasies than is resolutely necessary for the film as a whole, but not nearly enough time for anyone watching it to really care about anyone, outside of the J.D. and Brax or Gwen storylines. The Patrick Sullivan (Stowell) fantasy of being a soldier is particularly trite, and the story of Melanie Stole (Hale) is such a mess that the various red herrings only serve to make the ending an absolute wreck. The less said of the magical stone at the root of everything, the better. While the film certainly manages to entertain, with some effective action sequences, *Fantasy Island* is just too bloated and circumscribed to ever land within the realm of creepy or hilarious. At best, it's a diverting *Cabin in the Woods* knock-off, and at worst, it's a '70s adaptation no one asked for, and no one wanted.

NICK SPACEK

+++++ 4



ZU WARRIORS FROM THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN (1983)

BLU-RAY • CERT: 18 • DIRECTOR: HARK TSUI • SCREENPLAY: CHEUK-HON SZETO STARRING: BIAO YUEN, HOI MANG, ADAM CHENG
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Starting at a frenetic pace and building to delirious heights, Tsui Hark's incredible film tells the story of young soldier Dik Ming-kei, one of many fighting for supremacy during the Tang dynasty, as he is separated from his army and finds himself lost in a cave in the titular mountain. Here he is attacked by strange creatures and survives only thanks to Master Ding Yan coming to his rescue. From then on, Ming-kei is thrown into a dangerous battle between near-godlike warriors that will decide the fate of the world.

Zu Warriors throws everything into the mix, from martial arts to fantasy to horror, comedy (much of which works), apocalyptic drama, and unrelenting action. It's all delivered at a heightened, unrelentingly loud pitch that could be wearisome as a result, but Hark displays a deft hand and is ably supported by a game cast. There's so much invention on display; be it the innovative special effects, gorgeous costumes, sets, or production design. It's easy to understand how it could be an influence on John Carpenter's *Big Trouble in Little China* amongst others. The new 2K restoration of the film presented here complements all this, displaying sharp colours and plenty of detail.

A good selection of extras make this a disc worth picking up, starting with the export cut, which has a present-day wraparound segment making it a time travel film. There's a commentary from expert Tony Rayns, a brand-new interview with Tsui Hark as well as archive interviews with three of the central cast. Also included is a segment from an episode of *Son of the Incredibly Strange Film Show* from 1989, making the disc a valuable archival celebration. In addition, early purchasers get a new collector's booklet featuring writing on the film.

An abundance of invention in the feature and a solid range of supplements make this a highly recommended purchase for fans and newcomers alike.

JAMES EVANS

+++++ 8



3:15 AM

VOD • CERT: 18 • DIRECTORS: FABIEN DELAGE, NICOLAS DELAGE, DIVINE, FRÉDÉRIC GROS, SABRINA KERRAR, EVELYNE PHAN, DAVID TILLAU • STARRING: LOLA DUBUS, EVA CHOW, MARIE CHRISTINE PHAN • NICOLAS DELAGE
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

One of the elements that makes *3:15 am* stand out is it's a found footage film from France. It's an anthology that manages to utilise the format well and is always engaging.

There are six stories told here, with one forming an envelope for each of the sections, revealing more of its tale as the film goes along. It's a standard lost-in-the-woods trope with a woman going more astray and coming across something incredibly strange - namely a naked lady with a goat's head.

Like many portmanteau movies, some vignettes work better than others. The strongest here is arguably *Ladies of the Night*, in which a group of students try to complete a thesis on prostitution and get more than they bargained for when attempting to interview some of the street workers. If that's the most satisfying, the final story, *The Grove*, is the most effective when it comes to chills. A couple go hiking in the wilds in the hope of finding Bigfoot but face a much more frightening situation. It also has some genuine moments of tension even though we never get a Bigfoot encounter, and it certainly makes effective use of the single-camera setup. The first story, *The Woman in the Attic*, contains one of the most awkward moments of exposition we've ever seen, but does manage to keep the interest and provide a few jolts.

As found footage-type films go, this is among the best. Using the anthology format means that we've no chance of getting bored. Although, the shaky camera does become a tad monotonous to the point of annoying and the filmmakers have strayed from the dogma by including some music to heighten the tension. Sticklers for realism will no doubt find this hard to swallow, but let's face it, we all know the score by now, so there's no harm in adding a little cinematic polish to the format.

Certainly one to check out if you're into the subgenre.

MARTIN UNSWORTH

+++++ 7



WE SUMMON THE DARKNESS

DVD, VOD • CERT: 15 • DIRECTOR: MARC MEYERS • SCREENPLAY: ALAN TREZZA • STARRING: ALEXANDRA DADDARIO, KEANU JOHNSON, LOGAN MILLER, MADDIE HASSON • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Travelling to a heavy metal concert in the country, three naïve young friends befriend a gang of fellow revellers and head out to an isolated mansion for the afterparty. Sex, drugs, and rock n' roll? Two out of three ain't bad, but there's no sex here: drugged up and knocked out, the chums awaken to find themselves the human sacrifice element of a satanic ritual. But is all as it seems? Kind of, but not really.

Director Marc Meyers' retro slasher flick boasts reasonably high production values and an enjoyably manic performance from star Alexandra Daddario (better served here than she was by the horrendous Texas Chainsaw 3D). Last year's Satanic Panic did the whole

thing better, but We Summon the Darkness is a fun diversion; a cross between Red State and Knock Knock. Its big twist will be obvious to anyone who is even half paying attention, but that doesn't make the film any less enjoyable.

We Summon the Darkness is well-directed and shot, with great performances from its young cast. It also has the bonus of one Johnny Knoxville, in a bit-part role as the local pastor. It's packed with cliché and its pacing is sluggish around the midsection, but it's devilishly fun – if a touch on the light side.

JOEL HARLEY

+++++ 7

ALSO RELEASED

JULY 27

THE OUTSIDER - SEASON 1

+++++ 8

"A must-see for those that crave seriously intense thrillers."

CASTLE ROCK - SEASON 2

+++++ 8

"Gets to really dig its teeth into some excellent Stephen King material."

JULY 6

DOOM PATROL - SEASON 1

+++++ 10

"Smart, action-packed, dramatic, and funny."

SWAMP THING - SEASON 1

+++++ 7

"There's a great show in there somewhere..."

JUNE 29

THE INVISIBLE MAN

+++++ 8

"Contains knife-sharp frights, which scare greater than those synthetically entrenched in recent mainstream/studio horror pictures."

JUNE 22

PENNYWORTH - SEASON 1

+++++ 10

"Looks and feels like an amalgam of every great '60s spy series but with modern-day cinematic television sensibilities."

JUNE 15

BIRDS OF PREY

+++++ 9

"Gleefully brutal."

DOUTLE

+++ 3

"Borders on the unforgivably terrible."

BRAHMS: THE BOY 2

++ 1

"A boring, utterly pointless sequel."

LITTLE JOE

+++++ 7

"The cinematic equivalent of taking some heavy mood stabilisers."

JUNE 8

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

+++++ 8

"A wonderful 90-minute nostalgia trip."

THE LIGHTHOUSE

+++++ 10

"Defies definition or explanation."

VIVARIUM

+++++ 6

"Thought-provoking."

OUT NOW

ONWARD

+++++ 7

"Not a classic, though it's a fun feature with something for everyone."

CATS

+++++ 6

"Marches to the beat of its own drum."

PARASITE

+++++ 8

"A multifaceted masterwork."

WATCHMEN - SEASON 1

+++++ 9

"Episodes 5 and 6 rank as two of the best single episodes of television ever."

BAD BOYS FOR LIFE

+++++ 8

"A crowd pleasingly loud, brash slice of escapism."

JUSTICE LEAGUE DARK: APOKOLIPS WAR

+++++ 9

"A complete and utter triumph from all involved."

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REVIEWS

CURRENT TV
RELEASES
REVIEWED & RATED



THE MANDALORIAN

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES) • WHERE TO WATCH: DISNEY+

A long time in the making, the Star Wars galaxy's first foray into live action TV is finally here. Created by Iron Man director Jon Favreau – obviously a fan of men in metal suits – The Mandalorian follows a member of the armour-clad warrior culture first introduced to us in the form of Boba Fett.

Set five years after Return of the Jedi, when the Empire has fallen but the New Republic has not yet established peace and order, on the frontier planets far-flung from the cities of Coruscant, this is Star Wars as we saw it in the first act of A New Hope – a Western-esque world of scum and villainy.

The influence of Western and samurai movies is embodied in the eponymous hero; seemingly nameless and faceless, this Mandalorian merc travels from planet to planet, working for hire and collecting bounties. As the season begins, he's hired by an Imperial remnant faction to collect a mysterious asset – a child. You've seen the memes, you know who it is.

It's also no big spoiler that our Mando builds up a bond with Baby Yoda – sorry, 'The

Child' – and that the Imperials can't entirely be trusted. Mando and Child end up travelling the galaxy together, him taking on jobs while trying to protect and learn more about his adorable companion, the Imperials never far from their trail. The structure works brilliantly; whereas many modern series drag one story out over a long run of episodes, this takes the more traditional approach of giving us a full Star Wars adventure every week – the Mandalorian will land on a

planet, encounter a problem, shoot stuff, and leave.

While these adventures, understandably, don't have the epic battles you'd expect from a big-screen Star Wars movie, each episode is a fast and action-packed slice of TV, with highlights including the Mando defending a fishing village from a gang of raiders and an encounter with a feisty band of Jawas. Various allies join along the way, including Nick Nolte's Ugnaught Kuill and

Gina Carano's ex-rebel Cara Dune, all building up to a Seven Samurai-esque standoff between this ragtag group and the Imperial faction led by Werner Herzog (yes, really) and Breaking Bad's Giancarlo Esposito.

With directors including Favreau, Taika Waititi, and Bryce Dallas Howard, the show looks gorgeous, quickly establishing its own style – Waititi even gets some of his trademark deadpan humour into his episode – while feeling a definite part of the Star Wars universe; there are stunning planetary landscapes, those iconic wipes, and, while not an overbearing amount of continuity, plenty of recognisable aliens and droids.

What ties the whole series together is the developing Lone-Wolf-and-Cub relationship between Mando and Child; as well as the cute puppetry, the performance of Pedro Pascal really sells this – we may not see his face under the helmet, but his growing affection for the Child, and the inner conflict of a man from an honourable society being made to do dirty jobs, are visible in the way he carries himself and his heavy armour.

The Mandalorian is a classic Western series with modern production values, set in the galaxy far, far away. Every episode is a Star Wars movie in half an hour, and a delight. And Baby Yoda is really, really cute.

KIERON MOORE

+++++ 10





TALES FROM THE LOOP

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES)

WHERE TO WATCH: AMAZON PRIME VIDEO

Based on an art book by Swedish artist Simon Stålenhag (who serves as an executive producer on the series), anthology series *Tales from the Loop* is set in and around the fictional Ohio town of Mercer, which is home to 'the Loop', an underground research station whose work with a hadron collider-type device has peculiar and unusual side effects on the town above and its citizens. 'The Loop' is the brainchild of a benign scientist (Jonathan Pryce), whose daughter (Rebecca Hall) and her family live in the town. Across its eight vaguely-interlocking episodes (characters drift in and out of the assorted narratives and timelines) the series

explores how one extraordinary or remarkable incident impacts upon and influences the people of the town. In the first episode, a young girl looking for her mother who works at the Loop, discovers an older version of herself, and in the second episode, two teens stumble across an abandoned device (the whole landscape around Mercer is dotted with odd bits of half-forgotten technology and huge deactivated robots that stand as silent sentinels about the town), which allows them to swap their personalities. The thrust of these episodes isn't about the idea, the sci-fi MacGuffin, it's about how the people touched by these 'miracles' deal with

them and work to accommodate them into the circumstances of their lives. So while, in Episode Six, for example, a lonely gay security guard at the Loop finds himself shifted into an alternative Universe where 'he' is locked into a slightly-fractious relationship, the episode isn't much concerned about the mechanics of how he travels to this new world but rather what happens when he gets there.

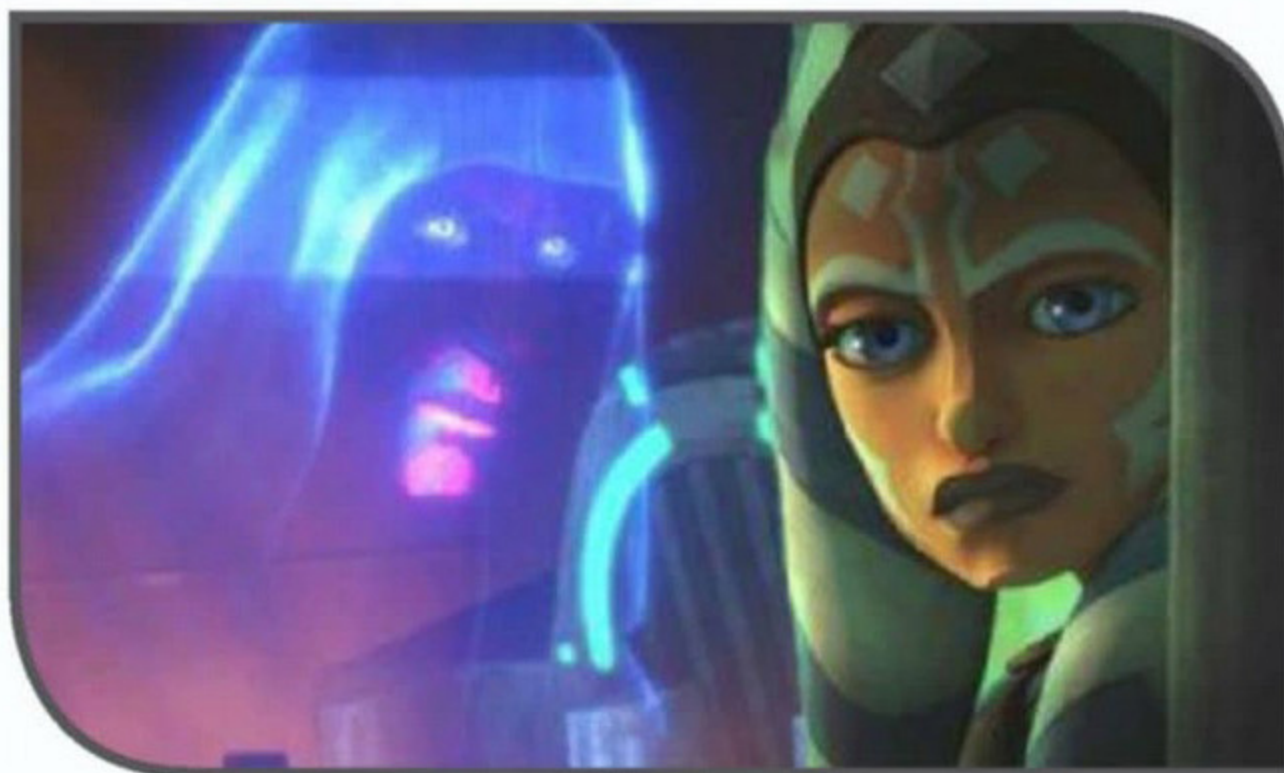
Tales from the Loop is, by its nature, not interested in sci-fi spectacle and the concepts that power its stories are, in many ways, bedrock genre ideas dating back decades. The series is sometimes achingly slow, ponderous to the point that it often looks as if nothing is happening at all and yet, if you have the patience to bear with the series for an episode or two, you may find that you are staring to become strangely fascinated by it. It's a fine-looking show, beautifully photographed (reflecting its origin in a series of intricate paintings), and often filmed in long shot to emphasise the stark otherworldliness of Mercer and its quietly-spoken inhabitants. Often the camera will linger for what seems like an age on one remote image; the guttering of a house, a darkening skyline, the three forbidding towers of the Loop that loom across the landscape. This is a show all about the visuals rather than the words – dialogue is often perfunctory – and

despite the presence of both Hall and Pryce in understated 'lead' roles, this is a show unconcerned with 'star' performances; it's an ensemble show in the loosest sense with the lives of many of the 'supporting' characters explored in the wake of the strange metaphysical journey they have found themselves embarking upon.

Tales from the Loop won't be to everyone's taste, and a sense of exasperation is entirely understandable. But there's no denying the wealth of talent involved here – Matt Reeves and Mark Romanek are executive producers, and the likes of Ti West and Jodie Foster have taken on directing duties – and it's clear that everyone has worked hard to create the show's dislocating sense of unreality. The series does run out of whatever head of steam it had by the time its last couple of episodes roll around, and it is, ultimately, a slightly frustrating experience because of its willful ambiguity. Yet it's also a hauntingly seductive and undeniably beautiful series that will get inside your head and drive you through its narrative insouciance if you disregard your expectations of anthology television and allow it to cast its hypnotic, unearthly spell.

PAUL MOUNT

+++++++ 7



STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS

REVIEWED: SEASON 7 (ALL EPISODES) • WHERE TO WATCH: DISNEY+

The Clone Wars animated TV series is regarded by many as one of the best things to come out of the prequels. With a feature-length movie and 133 episodes in total, it's certainly one of the longest pieces of canon Star Wars fiction available and it has been consistently good throughout.

Of course, all good things have to come to an end, and

anyone who's seen *Revenge of the Sith* already knows how the Clone Wars concludes. The TV series worked through this by adding additional characters for us to care about. In addition to showing us that Anakin Skywalker was a flawed but decent person back then, it also gave us insight into Padmé, Obi-Wan, and even Count Dooku. But

more importantly, it made us care about the clones themselves, giving them individual personalities and character arcs. And of course, Ahsoka Tano, Anakin Skywalker's padawan.

By the time we get to the final season, time is rapidly running out. Most viewers can see that the war is coming to an end, even if the characters cannot. The season splits into three distinct storylines. The first of these is *The Bad Batch*. We're introduced to a team of clones who break the mould; each one a specialist but also an outsider. The result is 'The Clone Wars done as an action movie in the style of *The Expendables*'. It's fun and it's easy to see why we didn't see these characters earlier in the series as it would have distracted from the stories of the other clones. It feels like a story arc that they wanted to do for a long time, but weren't able to get to.

The next arc is a similar sort of thing; though it features Ahsoka Tano, this is more a 'street-level' story, focusing

on the criminal elements in the Star Wars universe. It's underworld hijinks with a band of adorable misfits and it's nice to see the failures of the Galactic Republic turned into a fun story. Fans of the underrated *Solo: A Star Wars Story* will likely get a kick out of this tale, and it also sets up our final arc....

If you know how *Revenge of the Sith* ends, then you will have good idea as to how this series comes to a close. The show does a phenomenal job of setting up all the pieces, setting up the viewers' expectations and then making it all come together. It is quite simply astonishing. The music, the acting, the various action set-pieces are all brilliantly worked out and even though you know what's coming, there's still plenty to surprise. Sombre, thrilling, and brilliantly done, The final season is a fine end to one of the best things about Star Wars.

ED FORTUNE

+++++++ 10



WESTWORLD

REVIEWED: SEASON 3 (ALL EPISODES)

WHERE TO WATCH: APPLE, AMAZON, GOOGLE PLAY

HBO's *Westworld* has become a very different beast to its source material, the schlocky '70s movie in which Yul Brynner's robot cowboy went kill-crazy in a theme park. In fact, it's also become very different to its own first season, as barely any scenes in this third run even take place in the eponymous wild west-themed attraction. This may be a good thing; Season 2 struggled

to maintain viewership, as its increasingly complex stories, not only set across different 'worlds' but across different time periods too, had started to feel not worth the flowcharts you needed to follow them. With that season ending on a big cliffhanger – robotic 'host' Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) and a group of her comrades escaping from *Westworld* into the real world

– Season 3 was pitched as something of a reboot. From the first episode, this season's very different tone is clear. We're no longer looking at sun-scorched mesas, but at a glossy 2050s Los Angeles. Caleb Nichols (Breaking Bad's Aaron Paul) is a former soldier now making a living through odd, and often illegal, jobs; one such job brings him to Dolores, who recruits him for her revolution. Across eight episodes, Dolores and Caleb infiltrate the corporate world, while her allies – including Tessa Thompson as a host who's stolen the identity of Delos executive Charlotte Hale – work on their own plans.

It's a more straightforward narrative than the previous season, and an exciting one, with a sense of escalation as the revolution grows. There's plenty of action: urban car chases and shootouts as stylish as *Heat* and *The Dark Knight*; a thrilling confrontation between Dolores and Thandie Newton's Maeve, turned against her old friend; and some good old-fashioned bits in which a giant robot smashes stuff up. On a visual level, it's as good as TV gets – gorgeously futuristic Singaporean locations, incredible cinematography and effects,

and Dolores has a fabulous new hairdo.

However, as her plan expands to involve a god-like AI which can predict human action, the show falls back into old mistakes. We're all for intelligent sci-fi, and there's a worthwhile point being made about the dangers of big data, but *Westworld*'s writers have a tendency to mistake complexity for depth. Interesting points get lost among tedious philosophising, and later episodes have so many characters, subplots, and ideas that the whole thing becomes heavy going for all but the most flowchart-loving of followers. At least Aaron Paul seems consistently as confused by everything going on as we were.

On the whole, though, this slick political thriller is a refreshing change of tone and a step up in quality. The finale's post-credits tease promises an exciting character addition for the confirmed Season 4 – there are some rewards for viewers following closely enough to still be with it!

KIERON MOORE

+++++++ 7



AMAZING STORIES

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES) • WHERE TO WATCH: APPLE TV+

The problem, in a nutshell, with this high profile reboot of the Steven Spielberg 1980s anthology series, is the stories really aren't that amazing. But then a show entitled *Mundane Stories* isn't likely to get punters reaching for their credit cards to subscribe to Apple's streaming service. The original series never really took flight, but those who remember its 45-episode run are more likely to recall its unfussy amiability rather than its determination to challenge its audience by taking

them to the dark and dangerous corners of their imaginations. This reboot arrives at a time when it's hard to turn on your TV without falling over an anthology show, and where most of them are busy dealing, often obliquely, with contemporary issues and fears or just determined to try and frighten the Bejesus out of the audience, *Amazing Stories* is content to just do what it always did; it's very nice. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with a show aiming for that elusive

'family' audience but certainly, on the evidence of these batch of episodes, it's going to need to try a little harder and be a little bolder if it's going to hold its own in a TV world much busier and far more impatient than the world it inhabited in the 1980s.

There is, however, something rather charming in the show's naivety and its shameless reuse of the hoariest of old genre clichés with no intention or desire to do anything remotely new with them. In its first episode, *The Cellar*, for example, a young builder renovating a dilapidated old house out in the country finds himself whisked back in time 100 years during a thunderstorm whereupon he embarks upon a romance with the house's previous owner without really sparing much of a thought for exactly why and how he has travelled in time or how he's going to get back. It's saccharine sweet, effortlessly watchable but utterly forgettable and throwaway. *Dynoman* and *the Volt!*, the show's only outright clunker, promises more than it can ever deliver. It's prime Spielbergian schmaltz in which a grandson and grandfather bond when the old man (the final screen appearance from Robert Forster) is gifted superpowers. Just when it looks as if *Amazing*

Stories is far too sickly for our gritty 21st-century sensibilities, it perks up a little in its final couple of episodes; *The Rift* genuinely looks and feels like a lost episode from the 1980s series. Here, a US pilot from the 1940s crashes in Ohio in 2020, having fallen through a temporal rift that has been responsible for untold 'natural disasters' across the ages. A special Government agency is responsible for ensuring that whatever comes through the rift goes right back in order to avoid further cataclysmic disruption, but the pilot and the young family he has befriended have other ideas. Again, there's really not one original idea in the whole episode, but it's hard to be sniffy about an hour of television that's so shamelessly retro and so determined to leave its audience with a warm glow rather than the slightly dread feeling of apprehension and terror most other modern anthologies are aiming for. *Amazing Stories* is to be guardedly admired for ploughing a furrow so different to its bedfellows and there's no reason a genre show shouldn't try to uplift rather than unsettle.

PAUL MOUNT

+++++++ 6



DEVS

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES)
WHERE TO WATCH: BBC iPLAYER

Alex Garland is best known for his work on movies such as *Ex_Machina*, *Dredd*, and *Annihilation*. *Devs* sees the writer/director return to the realms of sci-fi with this visually stunning series about the nature of reality. This is the sort of sci-fi tale where technology is used to shine a light on the human experience, though there is also a fair amount of action, subterfuge, and drama along the way. It's a visually striking series that expects to be re-watched multiple times, as the on-screen language is so dense that it is impossible to understand it all on a first pass. It's also a multi-layered story with metaphor and meaning piled on at every possible stage. At points, the 'art' of the storytelling almost overtakes the story itself, but Garland keeps it just on the right side of entertaining throughout.

Devs is a perfect example of the golden age of television. Such a high-budget, lush, and incredibly indulgent show would not have been made a decade ago, or if it had the whole thing would have been an episode of some sort of anthology. Instead, we get eight long episodes that allow Garland to tell a meandering tale of man's desire to control the uncontrollable. We follow employees of Silicon Valley tech-firm Amaya, a company that has conquered the market for computer processing power. Nick Offerman plays Forest, the CEO of the firm, which he has named after his dead daughter. Forest's big project is kept in isolation and is only known as 'DEVS', which employs only the best software developers you can find. Forest's project has attracted great interest, and he'll do anything to keep it away from those who would interfere. This is an espionage thriller, superficially wrapped in a shell of super-tech and weirdness. It's also a story of redemption and ascension, and one that almost ascends up itself at times. Alison Pill is perfect as the steely-eyed executive, keeping the CEO on track throughout. Sonoya Mizuno is outstanding as Lily Chan, our main protagonist and 'person who is trying to figure out what's going on'. *Devs* is a near-perfect companion piece to *Ex_Machina*, being a parable about the power of reason and imagination, and how the line into madness is easily crossed. Essential, if not easy, viewing.

ED FORTUNE

+++++ 8



THE MIDNIGHT GOSPEL

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES)
WHERE TO WATCH: NETFLIX

Adventure Time creator Pendleton Ward has teamed up with comedian Duncan Trussell to deliver something truly unique, a show that sometimes feels like it could be unwatchable, but instead turns into something deeply moving and thoughtful. *The Midnight Gospel* follows Clancy (Trussell), a 'spacecaster' who travels to worlds about to experience an apocalypse so he can interview people for his show. He travels using a forbidden universe simulator, and is based in a dimension called 'the Chromatic Ribbon'.

While he converses with his guests on everything from meditation to listening and deep existential philosophy, most of the time it looks like someone gave a toddler some acid and watched what they came up with. The visual style is utterly bewildering. It is a task to keep up with the depth of conversation Clancy has with his guests when there is so much vivid nonsense happening around them. Yet it doesn't feel like a distraction. Rather, this demand for focus is central to the show's purpose. Clancy's journey over eight episodes takes him in a direction of, if not enlightenment, then deep spiritual learning. This is best seen in the final episode, which guest stars Trussell's real-life mother and features the most powerful emotional crescendo.

It's visual eccentricity, sci-fi expressionism, and characters all contribute moments of light relief and joy amidst some serious discussions. The philosophy doesn't overpower the weirdness, but embraces it. Sometimes it is hard to see where the series is going, but it feels very suitable to have more of a focus on where things are, rather than where they are going. It means you can sit back and enjoy this crazy, crazy universe for what it is, from the last giant zombie to the spaceship cat crew.

The Midnight Gospel trips hard, and sometimes you will be wondering what the hell you are watching. But if you stick with it, you are rewarded with a resonating and fulfilling experience, as good as any you could hope to get from a TV show. It will not be for everyone's tastes, but you can stand to gain a lot from Ward's most recent stroke of genius.

JAMES HANTON

+++++ 8



BEASTARS

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES)
WHERE TO WATCH: NETFLIX

It's a sign of how well thought out *Beastars* story is that the anthropomorphic aspect only proves a distraction in the early episodes. Maybe it's because once you strip away the animals, there is a lot of the atypical anime narrative here - high school, the yakuza, and lewd humour to name but a few things. What helps to set *Beastars* apart is a fascinating focus on instinct and drive. All the major characters, each given the backstories and detail they deserve, are all in some way characterised by instinct. It boils down to their species, and is the main source of tension in the show - an oppositional undercurrent between the carnivores and herbivores keeps things tense. The social commentary is obvious; interspecies prejudice is used as a parallel to human prejudice. The main storyline, however, concerns lone wolf Legoshi, and his conflicted feelings for the female dwarf rabbit Haru. The dissection of Legoshi's thinking is Freudian, overtaken by guilt and indecision as the desire to love and consume bleed into each other. This feeling is brought to life with vivid, stirring moments of colour. The imaginative streak of Fuji TV's producers is sensational, gifting texture and eye-popping visuals to moments that could have been fine without them. Happily, *Beastars* doesn't fall into the trap of making it all about a moping male loner. Haru is granted the same level of complexity and importance, as her own complicated feelings for the friendly but strange wolf take hold.

Beastars maintains the gorgeous hand-drawn look of anime while adding in some extra flourishes. The world is at times dark, other times colourful, and always rich with detail. The one exception is the title sequence, which instead reverts to a simplistic but fantastic stop-motion style that signifies all the complexity in a matter of minutes. It depends heavily on the style of the original manga series, but adds extra flourishes. It also retains the little in-jokes that help to characterise each animal (Legoshi is literally a lone wolf, there is a vicious rumour that Haru breeds like.. well, a rabbit, and the school heartthrob is a stag).

Make no mistake, this is one weird show. At times it can feel uncomfortable, but it never feels overly brazen.

JAMES HANTON

+++++ 8



EMERGENCE

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES) • WHERE TO WATCH: NOWTV

It's amazing what you can do with science these days, and sometimes it's hard to draw a line between science fiction and 'science fiction'. With a foot in both camps, although definitely leaning towards the latter, what with its superpowers and sentient A.I.s and whatnot, *Emergence* is a story about artificial humans and real humans and exactly what makes someone 'human' in the first place.

Fargo's Allison Tolman is

Jo Evans, a newly divorced police chief in a small Long Island town, who is called to the scene of a plane crash on a local beach. The wreckage makes it extremely unlikely that anyone will be found alive but Jo finds a young girl hiding in the sand dunes, and rushes her to hospital. Government agents clean up the crash site and then demand Jo hands over the girl, but she sends them packing only to encounter the real government

agents who have only just arrived. Deciding that something just isn't right, Jo takes the girl home for safekeeping.

The girl – who has no memories, and who Jo names Piper – is the key to the story; what happened on the plane, how did she survive, and who are these shady figures who want to get hold of her so badly that they will lie, steal, and even kill to get her? A mystery begins to build, one that involves futuristic tech companies, investigative journalists, terrorist groups, and a reclusive genius, and if this all sounds a bit like *Fringe* then that's a very good thing, indeed.

Tolman is wonderful as police chief Evans, wearing her feelings on her face, a very physical performer who brings every scene to life with her huge charisma. Playing opposite her are a cavalcade of well-known actors in some unfamiliar roles; *Scrubs*' Donald Faison as Jo's ex-husband Alex, and *Highlander*'s Clancy Brown as her quiet, unassuming father Ed, give a depth to Jo's household – a place of safety and comfort for Piper – that envelops the viewer as much as the young girl.

And then there's Terry

O'Quinn, set up as the show's big bad, Richard Kindred, a sinister Elon Musk figure with all the creepy aura of John Locke and Jerry Blake. Like *Fringe*, just who is the big bad is a changeable thing, with twists and turns, and questions of trust and motives, keeping the viewer hooked from one episode to the next.

Emergence has been renewed for a second season, with the final moments of Season One setting up a doozy of a twist, and with the show's core premise – which we won't spoil here but becomes evident halfway through the thirteen-episode run – allowing for characters to return, everything is up for grabs. There's a warmth to *Emergence* – that starts with Allison Tolman and spins out through the rest of the show – that you rarely find in network TV shows these days and that's worth rewarding. What's emerging isn't just the next phase of humanity, it's an intelligent and wholehearted story that can't help but evolve you with it.

ALAN BOON

★★★★★★★★★ 9



UPLOAD

REVIEW: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES) • WHERE TO VIEW: AMAZON PRIME VIDEO

Fans still mourning the recent passing of NBC's extraordinary *The Good Place* might find some solace for a while in *Upload*. This new comedy/drama may first appear to be astonishingly derivative of Michael Shur's thoughtful, mind-bending sitcom in that it deals with the concept of 'the afterlife' and how those who find their way to it deal with their new surroundings and the ramifications of an eternal existence beyond the grave. But in fairness, *Upload*, created by Greg Daniels whose own comedy CV is no slouch (he's worked on the likes of *Seinfeld*,

Parks and Recreation, and even *The Simpsons*) has been 'in development' for several years so any resemblance to *The Good Place*, although unfortunate, certainly isn't intentional, and it quickly becomes apparent that although both shows seem to share the same creative DNA, they are really quite different beasts.

Robbie Amell plays Nathan Brown, an unfeasibly hunky computer programmer whose life is brought to an untimely end when his driverless car smashes into the back of a stationary vehicle. But death is no longer the end and Nathan's extravagant

girlfriend Ingrid (Allegra Edwards) arranges for his consciousness to be uploaded into a digital afterlife environment known as Lake View, a paradise of luxury living and wide-open spaces. Nathan's progress is monitored in the 'real world' by his 'angel' (technical supervisor) Nora (Andy Allo), who helps him adjust to his new circumstances by occasionally joining him in Lake View via a VR headset. But Nathan is troubled by missing memories, and he struggles to come to terms with his own death even as he tries to cope with the constant presence of Ingrid in his afterlife and the nagging suspicion that his death wasn't a complete accident.

Upload plays with vaguely similar concepts to *The Good Place* but as it develops it becomes a very different show. Its humour is a little more measured and generally less relentless and outrageous than Shur's series and its themes tend to be more romantic and conspiratorial rather than the often-whimsical, provocative, and existential material *The Good Place* handled so deftly. The concept of a 'digital afterlife' is fairly well-established in *Upload*'s near-future even if it brings with it many of the prejudices and inequalities we might have hoped to leave behind in the real world. Early episodes play nicely with the 'fish out of water' trope as Nathan explores

his new world but the show spends as much time back in the 'real' world as Ingrid refuses to give up on her relationship with Nathan even as his 'angel' Nora, a frustrated singleton, finds herself increasingly drawn to a man who isn't really alive. Some of the comedy is broad-brush stuff but there are some inspired and startling visuals in Nathan's constantly surprising new environment and supporting characters like his new 'best friend' Luke (Kevin Bigley) and Dylan (Rhys Slack), dead for seven years but still trapped in an eleven-year-old body and desperate to be allowed to 'grow up' provide the bulk of the belly-laughs. The weak link here, unfortunately, is Amell as Nathan. He's largely the straight man, reactive rather than proactive and his attempts at comedy are a little awkward and self-conscious and he's usually the least interesting character in any scene, which tends to undermine the show when he's supposed to be the one supporting and powering the storyline.

Upload is pleasant, often charming stuff, and its ten episodes are easily-digestible and never outstay their welcome.

PAUL MOUNT

★★★★★★★★★ 7



KINGDOM

REVIEWED: SEASON 2 (ALL EPISODES) • WHERE TO WATCH: NETFLIX

Despite being one of its more low-key releases, Kingdom, was very much a game-changer for Netflix. It was the company's first South Korean production, and the \$1-2 million budget pumped into each episode of the first season proved that the service was as 'all in' on producing original foreign content as it is when it comes to its usual, American fare. Based on the webcomic series The Kingdom of the Gods, written by Kim Eun-hee (who also writes the

TV adaptation), Kingdom is utterly remarkable for managing to put a genuinely exciting fresh spin on the tired old zombie mythos.

Out of the gate, Kingdom sets itself apart from your Walking Deads and Z Nations and even your Trains to Busan and Seoul Stations, simply by virtue of its medieval (or, more specifically, Joseon Dynasty) setting. The action avoids the genre clichés of soldiers gunning down zombies in a spray of bullets because

most of these soldiers are armed with swords.

Perhaps more excitingly, though, Kingdom takes its living dead concept back to ideas rooted in ancient mythology. Drawing upon things like revenant and vampire lore, Kingdom's zombies are notable for their apparent need to lie dormant during sunlight hours, meaning that the show provides us with an incredibly interesting dynamic whereby the characters get twelve hours a day to prepare for a twelve-hour zombie onslaught as their castle or stronghold begins a siege, each night.

Quite frankly, the show is a very real contender for the title of 'greatest zombie television series of all time'. On one hand, you've got the show's political drama following the dynamic between various royals vying for power throughout everything that happens. Completely remove all supernatural elements and this side of the show would be more than enough to sustain a very well-respected prestige drama. But whenever it feels like the bickering over the rightful heir to the throne is getting a bit dry, the show unloads its action

set-pieces on you.

Expertly directed by Kim Seong-hun throughout Season 1 (and one episode of Season 2), followed by Park In-je for the show's remainder, the show is a true roller-coaster of a thrill-ride, balancing nail-biting zombie carnage with the sword-based military action of countless samurai movies with a handful of darkly comedic moments that would make Sam Raimi proud.

Season 1 started with a solid pace and continually picked up steam through to the last episode, so it's something of a shame that the newly released second season feels much more like filler material in comparison. In terms of moving the storyline along, the newest six episodes feel like they should have been compressed into one, serving as last season's finale or, perhaps, this season's premiere episode. That said, a third season is still, very much something that we'd welcome so they must have done something right.

SOL HARRIS

+++++ 8



ALTERED CARBON

REVIEWED: SEASON 2 (ALL EPISODES) • WHERE TO WATCH: NETFLIX

Based in the 26th century, when humans can (sort of) live forever, if they decide to, through Cortical Stacks (technology that stores everything about you) and sleeves (just like a different skin in a video game), Altered Carbon chronicles the adventures of mercenary Takeshi Kovacs through different moments in time. One of the benefits of this is the fact that you can have different actors playing the lead. In Season 1, Will Yun Lee took on the Envoy story of Kovacs, then RoboCop remake star Joel Kinnaman led us on a horrific and jealousy-filled tale involving his character's sister, Reileen Kawahara. Now, Marvel's Falcon, Anthony Mackie, sheds a new, much more advanced skin in Season 2, as he tries to find the love of his life, Quellcrist Falconer

on Harlan's World.

After Horace Axley (a founder of Harlan's World) asks for Kovacs' protection - in return for telling him where Quellcrist is - their mission is brought to a violent stop, as Kovacs wakes up to find Axley killed, by, who would have thought it, Quellcrist herself! As she runs away from the scene, instead of catching up with her once partner, this poses a whole slew of new questions, as not only is Kovacs trying to find Quellcrist once more, but now he has to find out about the person in that skin, as she is far from what he once remembers. Believing that Kovacs is behind the murder of said founder, Season 2 gets tangled up with a political agenda as the deceptive Governor Danica Harlan (Lela Loren) and the aggressive

Colonel Ivan Carrera (Torben Liebrecht) try to track down our show-runner.

Emitting calm chaos (with a frustrated attitude), and at times coolly narrating his current predicament in the background, Anthony Mackie has done a profound job at taking over as Kovacs, and after the first episode, you will already accept his take on continuing this killer personality. For those of you thinking that a new protagonist would change the entire cast, then prepare to be mistaken as many fan favourites from Season 1 return! Pulling in massive intrigue with their screen-time has to be Chris Conner, as we see a glitched-up/deteriorating Poe again working alongside Kovacs, while he tries to figure out his own place in all of this madness. This side plot about Poe is a fantastic evolution for the character, and with the brilliant addition of their new close friend, Dig 301 (Dina Shihabi) it unravels so many interesting sides to Poe that will delight viewers.

The fast-paced flow of Season 2 (to keep up with the plot, we recommend that you don't look away from the screen - ever) is firmly held together because of the time travel relationship between Kovacs and Falconer. As the continuation of this pair brutally confronting the darkest corners of their lives progresses, the

story goes on to conclude in a fiery, and fulfilling fashion. They've fused key elements from the first season with this one, and by mixing that with plenty of thrilling, slow-motion augmented fight scenes (don't forget that Kovacs has a high tech skin, so the action is going to be on a more stomping level), you'll find it hard not to go straight on to the next episode as one finishes.

There's no doubt that this comparison has been made before, but for fans of Blade Runner (with a pinch of John Wick) you will completely love the landscape that the series has created. (Please can the people that worked on Altered Carbon immediately start constructing a Blade Runner TV show?) The sets and cinematography are incredible, and as Kovacs searches for Quellcrist through neon-lit nightclubs, markets, and hotels, you'll find yourself completely immersed in this addictive sci-fi scenario. Initially, Season 2 might seem like it has a lot of unnecessary layers to it, however, once you give those said layers time to grow, and a much closer look, then you'll see that there is a lot to be adored.

ANDREW DEX

+++++ 8



VAGRANT QUEEN

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES)
WHERE TO WATCH: SYFY, NOWTV

In this age of easy special effects and complicated, angst-filled arcs, it's nice to know that they're still making pulp sci-fi. *Vagrant Queen* is a low-budget piece of disposable fun that also happens to be almost perfect. From the Chris Foss-inspired spaceships to the funny-faced aliens, the show feels like an artefact from last century, brought up to date just enough to keep it fresh and interesting. Our titular *Vagrant Queen* is called Elida (Adriyan Rae), an exiled princess who has spent most of her time on the streets as a scavenger, raiding ancient caches of technology for a quick profit. She's assisted by Isaac, (Tim Rozon) a Human from Earth who is very, very lost, as this entire series is set in a galaxy that is not our own. Rounding out the crew of space adventurers is Amae Rali (Alex McGregor), a horned alien who happens to be a genius engineer. Part of the charm of this show is that none of this requires a lot of thought. It's a tough-as-nails quirky crew who can't help but get into trouble.

It's also nice that each of the characters feels like they're the stars of their own show, and this is where much of the conflict and humour comes from. Though it isn't exactly slapstick, there's a fair bit of understated physical humour throughout and some pretty strong one-liners. The main storyline involves Commander Lazaro (Paul du Toit), an agent of the Republic who has been hunting Elida down for a very long time. He's a camp and crazy villain, because it's that sort of TV series. Elida wants nothing to do with her past, but gets sucked into a plot to rescue her mother, whom she long thought dead. However, this is a show that loves to subvert expectations and it takes the tale to some pretty odd places.

Vagrant Queen pulls off the retro-kitsch vibe recently made popular by movies such as *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Thor: Ragnarok* (but with much less cash), treating the audience to gorgeous, comic-inspired cosmic settings. It has a lot of potential, and is closer to the idea of 'Xena: Warrior Princess in space' than *Andromeda* ever was. The actors are having fun, the SFX guys are doing fantastic and creative things with very little, and everything simply gels together. A joy to watch!

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★★★★★★ 8



SNOWPIERCER

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES)
WHERE TO WATCH: NETFLIX UK

Bong Joon-Ho's apocalyptic train ride *Snowpiercer* is a candidate for the biggest sleeper hit of the decade. The arrival of a TV series expanding and modifying his idea is as warmly welcome as it is clearly inferior. *Snowpiercer* is a perfectly fine piece of TV that nonetheless must be content to bask in the greatness of Joon-Ho's original film. Based on both the film and the graphic novels by Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette, *Snowpiercer* drives relentlessly forward with little time to turn over intricate details. It starts out as a murder mystery - lower-class freeloader or 'tailee' Layton (Daveed Diggs) is called upon by the train's Head of Hospitality, Melanie (Jennifer Connelly) to solve a murder in first class. The series churns on from there solidly, breathlessly, and not always clearly, into a story of deception and rebellion. Much like a train, it can feel like it takes a long time to get up to speed, then risks slamming on the brakes just as something interesting is about to happen. Unafraid to diverge from its predecessors, *Snowpiercer* takes some gambles that mostly pay off, introducing new kinds of characters into the mix. Layton is by far the most successful, increasingly worn out by carrying the burden of being "the good guy" in the face of corruption. Melanie too proves to be one of the series' main hooks, helped by a powerhouse performance from Connelly. A few of the characters, however, end up with little or nothing to do by the end. Annalise Basso's character especially goes from having a big role to play to being an irritating thorn who does little more than come out with some thirsty garble from time to time. Visually, from the CGI to the gorgeous set design, the series is to die for. It's not what you see that occasionally lets the series down. The final three episodes are full of action and drama, but what *Snowpiercer* lacks is the sensation of sinking your teeth into reality. The subversive, piercing streak of the film goes amiss, replaced by a medley of characters and some peculiar attempts at humour. *Snowpiercer* - 1001 cars long - is a ride worth catching, as long as you can stick with it until the journey's end.

JAMES HANTON

★★★★★★★★★★ 7



SPACE FORCE

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES)
WHERE TO WATCH: NETFLIX

When General Mark R. Naird (Steve Carell) is thrown into running the new Space Force sector for the US government, he instantly puts his whole heart into it, ready to show that there's a very positive reason to running a unit that might seem pointless to others. Being called a 'Spaceman' is a joke to some, but to him, that's a very serious title to have.

With *The Office* writer Greg Daniels and Steve Carell listed as the creators, you might be fooled into expecting a similar humour. However, the jokes are refreshingly far from being in the same format, but are just as well thought out. For example, if you've ever wondered what it would be like to run a space mission with a space chimpanzee, then you're in for some hilarious viewing. There's a well-balanced writing instruction here, and alongside emotional segments, they've pushed humour into even the most minute moments to give a consistently impressive watch. *Space Force* holds an incredible cast, with the likes of Ben Schwartz (now of *Sonic the Hedgehog* fame) and Lisa Kudrow, and even the late Fred Willard contributing to its star-studded comedic roster. All of this is supported with an orchestra heavy, movie-worthy soundtrack.

One of the highlights has to be the constant back and forth between Naird and his team of know-it-all scientists. Most notably, the tired & frustrated Dr. Adrian Mallory (John Malkovich). Mallory assumes that Naird has no idea what he is doing, and although at times Naird really doesn't, he is still giving it his all, and it secretly seems that he wants to prove he is worthy to Mallory. As the series flies on, and as the Chinese Space Force cause havoc for Naird in mischievous ways, we see this spotlighted work duo progress into a friendship. The chemistry captured is excellent, and it's a vital ingredient.

Behind the running of *Space Force* lies the family thread, which is wonderfully held up by Maggie (Kudrow) and Erin Naird (Diana Silvers). There's a lot of tension here, and the classic question of "What's more important, family or work?" is asked. As this builds up, we see *Space Force* skyrocket towards a gripping, "Boots on the Moon!" ending.

ANDREW DEX

★★★★★★★★★★ 7



HARLEY QUINN

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES) • WHERE TO WATCH: E4, APPLE, AMAZON

Cards on the table: this writer hates Harley Quinn. Or rather, hates what she's become. When Paul Dini introduced her in *Batman: The Animated Series*, she was a delightful foil for the Joker, a Robin to his Batman. Once *Suicide Squad* happened and Harley Quinn was everywhere, there just wasn't enough to her to support all that. Fundamentally, Harley Quinn is a murderer, and at the

very least she is an accomplice to acts of terrorism on a scale that would dwarf 9/11 or the Aum Shinrikyo attack on the Tokyo underground. To succeed as the lead of her own story, Harley has to be sympathetic, an anti-hero, the same fate that befell her Marvel counterpart Deadpool, and that should make fans of comic books, raised on Spider-Man and Superman, very uncomfortable.

With all that in mind, Harley Quinn was all set to be the first DC Universe offering that we weren't particularly enthused about, but then a funny thing happened; early word had it that it was really good... and it is! This is a show that doesn't shy away from the fact that Harley - and the other villains she pals around with - kill people without a second thought. It's gory, brutal, and very, very funny.

The show opens with Harley still under the yoke of the Joker, but beginning to grow tired of his shtick. When he sacrifices her again to make a getaway, even Batman is questioning the health of their relationship, ensuring that Harley has plenty of time to consider her status with another stay in Arkham. Still, The Joker will break her out soon, right?

The *Big Bang Theory*'s Kaley Cuoco is perfect as Harley, and her friendship with Lake Bell's Poison Ivy is the heart of the show. But this is also a series about Harley wanting to be taken seriously - ironically - as a villain in her own right, and yearning for the membership of the Legion of Doom that will prove it. To achieve her aims, Harley recruits some henchmen

in the shape of failed actor Clayface, tech genius King Shark, and Doctor Psycho, who even the Legion of Doom disowned after he called Wonder Woman the 'c' word. Her crew - and the other villains they encounter, such as a ridiculous Bane obsessed with explosions, and a Casanova Kite Man - are hilariously written, and brilliantly voiced, with top-notch work from Alan Tudyk, Ron Funches, Tony Hale, and J.B. Smoove hitting the majority of the jokes for a home run.

Harley Quinn is a great example of what DC Universe has been doing well. The vast majority of their original programming so far has been smart and accomplished, a whole world away from their inconsistent and fractured cinematic offerings. An animated show for adults, but without taking some of the usual, lazy shortcuts, it's genuinely funny, and a must-watch for anybody who likes comics. And violence. And swearing. Lots of violence and swearing.

ALAN BOON

★★★★★★★★★★ 8



CURSED FILMS

REVIEWED: SEASON 1 (ALL EPISODES) • WHERE TO WATCH: SHUDDER

As genre fans, we all enjoy the occasional salacious behind the scenes story of intrigue on movie sets, be it a falling out between actors or something much more attention-grabbing. This is where Shudder's new series, *Cursed Films*, comes in. Focusing on five of the most infamous horror movies ever made, this short-run covers *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *Poltergeist*, *The Crow*, and *Twilight Zone: The Movie*, and delves into the sordid tales that we've all heard about. What is most interesting is that the episodes don't gravitate around the urban legends surrounding the sets but, in fact, they try their best to debunk what we've heard.

Using talking heads from fields ranging from individuals involved in the films themselves to religious experts and practising black magicians, each episode gives us a recap of the ignoble events that have been the crux of numerous websites and books before going beyond the looking glass to reason why these things actually happened. A set fire on *The Exorcist*, leaving only the Regan bedroom set untouched, separate aeroplanes of the cast (main star Gregory Peck) and crew of *The Omen* being hit by lightning, the tragic deaths of *Poltergeist* stars Heather O'Rourke (who died from a misdiagnosis during the filming

of the second sequel) and Dominique Dunne (who died after her boyfriend strangled her) had nothing to do with the production of the films, and, of course, the apparent curse of the Lee family as Brandon Lee was shot and killed on the set of *The Crow* are just a few subjects covered here.

For *Twilight Zone: The Movie* there is only one specific focus, the sad deaths of actor Vic Morrow and two children on the set due to an accident involving a helicopter. Richard Sawyer, who was the production designer on the film, recounts how this film was his big break and the end of his career at the same time. He tells us of how the events unfolded, and it is truly heartbreaking to see this man laid bare as he clearly still blames himself, even though the extra information we are given proves that there are others who are more accountable than him. One warning we offer you, the viewer, about this episode, is that you do actually see the footage from the set, which includes the devastating moment the helicopter crashes into the three victims. The moment is jarring and seemingly at odds with what is shown elsewhere in the series. It comes across as almost sensationalistic, and the event would have been better served if the footage had cut just before the crash. Of all the episodes, this

moment actually leaves a bitter taste in the mouth.

What experts, including Kane Hodder giving the stuntman point of view, offer us are explanations that serve to provide a real-world grounding as to what actually happened - be it pure coincidence, bad luck, timing, or even pure negligence. In the *Twilight Zone* case specifically, director John Landis does not come across well, and it may be telling that the director allegedly did not respond to a request for comment by the creators of the show. There does appear to be more of a story behind the events on *The Exorcist*, with Linda Blair flatly refusing to discuss any further detail as to whether she actually had bodyguards after the release of the film in the US.

This may only be a one-off series, but it's interesting to see the creators try and put a different spin on the rumours we've all heard and give us a fresh perspective on whether these films were actually cursed or not. Whether you decide to believe what you're told here or prefer to hang on to the sensational history of these films is entirely up to you.

JD GILLAM

★★★★★★★★★★ 7

OST

THE STARBURST
GUIDE TO THE LATEST
SOUNDTRACKS
BY NICK SPACEK



recovered from the original reels.

Four Flies will also have the vinyl debut for **Morte sospetta di una minorenne**, also known as **Suspicious Death of a Minor**. Luciano Michelini's score to the 1975 Sergio Martino giallo, which also features organ work in the Ortophonic Studio in Rome, the same church organ from which emanated Goblin's score for **Deep Red**, recorded just months prior to **Suspicious Death Of A Minor**. It must be said that all of the Umiliani recordings sound amazing. Despite having been unavailable for the better part of 50 years, they are crisp, clean, and loaded with sonic range. For those familiar with the composer's work, it should come as no surprise that many of the tracks fall within the lounge spectrum of music. Umiliani's work was definitely rooted in the bossa nova style, with jazz influences, but it's all amazingly swinging. The more action-oriented cuts from the **Orgasmo** and **A Quiet Place to Kill** are pleasantly surprising in their energetic delivery, especially the latter's chase theme, which does an astonishing job of blending Tin Pan Alley piano with huge action brasses for an energetic listening experience.

As part of our 'buying too many records while drinking beer in the middle of the afternoon' way of dealing with all of this recent craziness, I bought a record from California record store and label Toxic Toast Records off Instagram. When it showed up, the store had included a postcard with some of their recent label releases, and tucked into the

While there aren't many new soundtracks or film scores being released due to the Covid-19 pandemic, several labels have managed to find and reissue a selection of very obscure titles, some of which were thought lost. It's a cornucopia of treasures.

First up is a selection of Piero Umiliani scores from Severin Films and Four Flies Records. At the end of June, Severin will release the six-disc set **The Complete Umberto Lenzi/Carroll Baker Giallo Collection**, which will feature on compact disc - for the first time ever - several of Umiliani's never-before-released scores. Granted, you'll also get six excellent gialli on Blu-ray, so hopefully, the price tag won't sting too much. While the pop

songs *Just Tell Me* by Wess & the Airedales, as well as the Lydia MacDonald-sung *Fate Had Planned It So* from 1969's **Orgasmo** had previously been released as singles contemporaneous with the film's release, the score has never been available in any format. Thanks to the discovery of the master tapes from the original recording session, the Severin box set will include the complete score, as well as the pop songs from the film. Four Flies Records will release that score as **Paranoia**, which includes the film version of *Fate Had Planned It So*, while they'll also have a 7-inch featuring the single version of that track, paired with *Just Tell Me*. Also included in the box set will be a CD featuring the unreleased

score for Lenzi's 1970 film **A Quiet Place to Kill**, along with the Riz Ortolani score for 1970's **So Sweet... So Perverse**, although that's been previously available on both compact disc and vinyl in the past. Four Flies will release **A Quiet Place to Kill** as a 10-inch vinyl record, also





lower right hand corner was the mention that the label was working on two releases related to the 1987 spa slasher, **Aerobicide**, also known as **Killer Workout**. While a release date has yet to be set, Toxic Toast's Andy George told us that the releases should hopefully be out this summer. The two releases will be Todd Hayen's score, with sound cues from the movie, as well as a soundtrack album featuring five of the pop songs from the film, along with three remixes. While that's not everything, as George told us, "It wasn't easy to even get five songs. I wish we could have got the whole soundtrack, but nobody has masters of full songs for a lot of the tracks, including the composers themselves." He does say that Toxic Toast got what he thinks are the most important tracks from the soundtrack, which include Jill Colucci's *Woman on Fire* in both its original form and a movie edit, Donna De Lory's *Only You Tonight* as the original and in an extended mix, Sunny Hilden's *Rock 'n' Rock* and its 12-inch mix, as well as Didi Nelson's *Love Is a Four Letter Word* and Gina Harlan's *Something To Feel*. They're all gloriously trashy disco and dance cuts that sound so very, very '80s.

It seems as though the only new things anyone can watch these days are streaming series, and one of the most

popular is Vice On TV's **Dark Side of the Ring**. Finding truth at the intersection of fantasy and reality in the veiled world of professional wrestling, the series tackles stories about pro wrestling that definitely show the less shiny and exciting side of the business. Covering the likes of the Chris Benoit murder/suicide, the tragic fate of the Von Erich clan, and the shocking death of Owen Hart in an entrance gone horribly wrong, the show is unflinching in its examination of the real stories behind some of wrestling's biggest names. The score, composed by Wade MacNeil and Andrew Gordon Macpherson, is out now on Spotify. It's a massive 36-track affair, and the music is as dark and macabre as some of the stories **Dark Side of the Ring** tackles. Combining a bit of a bombastic homage to the sound of the wrestling world like big guitars and cheesy keyboards with a horror-synth aesthetic, the composers' music is note-perfect for the program it scores. Waxwork Records will have a vinyl edition out later this summer. It'll be a double 180-gram LP, with opaque pink with purple smoke coloured vinyl for disc one, and opaque blue with white smoke coloured vinyl for disc two, and you can pre-order it at the label's website.

Last month, Activision announced the impending

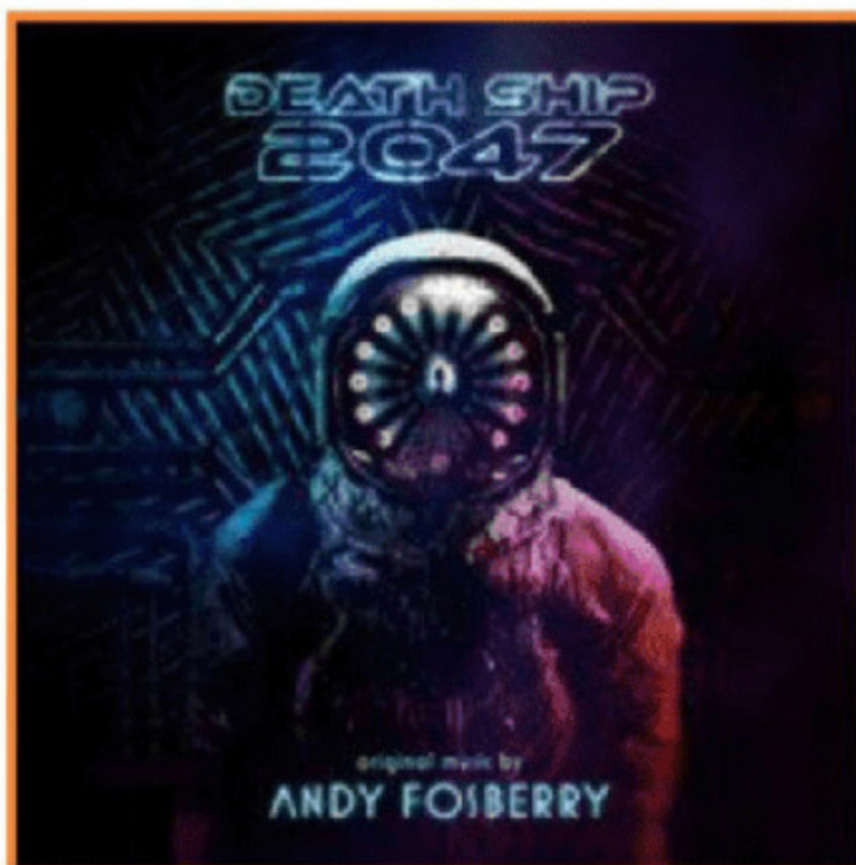
release of **Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 1+2**, a remastered edition of the classic PlayStation games from the early 2000s, which will be released on Xbox One, PS4, and PC September 4th. A week later, they dropped a Spotify playlist and the track listing for the game's soundtrack. The soundtrack to **Tony Hawk** is as memorable as the game itself, exposing an entire generation of gamers to a variety of bands and songs. If you're not going down the ramp of the warehouse while Goldfinger's *Superman* plays, is it even **Tony Hawk's Pro Skater**? Seriously: the YouTube views for that song jumped by a reported 800% the day the remastered edition was announced, and the band's quarantine edition video of *Superman* has 1.3 million views as of writing. It was a big deal having a song in the game, and the nostalgia factor for these tunes is pretty high. Pretty much all of the songs from the original games, including Dead Kennedys' *Police Truck*, Suicide Machines' *New Girl*, Rage Against the Machine's *Guerilla Radio*, and Jerry Was a Racecar Driver by Primus will all return, although Activision was unable to secure the rights for five of the original games' songs, such as Public Enemy and Anthrax's *Bring the Noise* and *Committed* by Unsane. No

announcements have been made if there will be replacements or not.

Finally, the folks at Spun Out of Control released two new cassettes while we were out. They're sadly sold out in their physical form, but you can readily snag both Steve Nolan and Grey Frequency's **Intercept**, as well as Andy Fosberry's **Death Ship 2047** from the label's Bandcamp page. The two releases are electronic dreams, with **Intercept** being a soundtrack for the age of mass information, isolation, and corrupted communication. It's certainly an album that's quite on the nose in terms of its applicability to our current situation, and the decayed sounds shot through with degraded communiques from outside the realm of perception really drive the point home. **Death Ship 2047** is inspired by Paul W.S. Anderson's 1997 space horror film **Event Horizon**, and is ran through with pounding percussion, terrifying Satanic choirs, and Lovecraftian synths, meant to reveal a world beyond this one, full of blood and sharp edges. Fosberry's work is pulse-quickenning and energetic, while still scaring the living daylights out of anyone who dares listen.

While we're at it, we'd also like to recommend the label's December release of Repeated Viewing's latest, **Nature's Revenge**. Alan Sinclair always does something new and exciting with every release, and it was a huge oversight on our part to have not mentioned it when it came out some months ago. If you want a spooky soundtrack where the organic meets the industrial, look no further than this cassette. *Fell Runners Embrace the Void* is the Skinny Puppy take on horror scores you never knew you needed.

Nick Spacek is the host of the **From & Inspired By** podcast and can be found on Twitter @nuthousepunks



REVIEWS

THE LATEST AUDIO
RELEASES REVIEWED
AND RATED



DOCTOR WHO - SERIES 12

COMPOSER: SEGUN AKINOLA • LABEL: SILVA SCREEN RECORDS • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Murray Gold provided numerous reworkings of the iconic Doctor Who theme alongside all the incidental music for the first ten seasons and associated special episodes of the 21st-century version of the show between 2005 and 2010. His incidental music, in particular, was often hugely memorable and he proved adept at creating earworm 'themes' for recurring characters, great sweeping orchestral extravaganzas for more heart-stopping moments of drama and spectacle and mournful, melancholic soundscapes for the show's poignant and emotional sequences. When he quit the

show in 2010, he left an aural void that was always going to be hard to fill. 27-year-old Segun Akinola, who has now provided the music for the two subsequent seasons curated by showrunner Chris Chibnall, appears to have a rather different musical approach to Gold, who is all about the tone and the tunes. Akinola's work – especially in Series 11 – was significantly less concerned with themes and motifs and beyond his moody version of the theme tune and some haunting pieces in Jodie Whittaker's first episode, his Series 11 soundtrack came and went without really making much of an impression.

Series 12 upped the game not only in regard to the series itself but also to Akinola's own contribution. Where much of his Series 11 score was discordant and atmospheric, the changed dynamic of the series itself seems to have focused him a little and this new 48-track 2-CD set presents not only Akinola's heartiest work for the series but also, here and there, tunes that rival some of the best of his predecessor.

Series 12 blew the cobwebs off Doctor Who as a series by rediscovering its sense of action, adventure, and serious jeopardy. Akinola reflects this in sturdy, powerful tracks that

underscored the high-paced hi-jinks on screen. This is best demonstrated by the suite of tracks from the giddy series opener *Spyfall*, where Akinola clearly revels in crafting a score, which cheekily riffs on the episode's James Bond affectations; *Doctor, the Doctor* and *Going Undercover* are thrillingly Bondian, muted, lush beats followed by brass stabs, and urgent staccato rhythms as the Doctor and her team infiltrate the villain's lair and set off on a high-speed hot pursuit chase. The *Spy Master* superbly conjures up the growing sense of unease and gradual realisation as the Doctor's 'best enemy' emerges from his apparently benign alter ego. Across the whole collection, Akinola seems to have nailed exactly what's required to support the episodes from the percussive clatter of *Praxeus* to the military crunch of *Ascension of the Cybermen* and the doomy portents of *The Timeless Children*. But he still favours a 'less is more' approach here and there, and this set is still full of quieter, more reflective moments punctuated by subtle background atmospherics that serve the narrative rather than drown it; an unfortunate tendency of some of Gold's more bombastic work.

The *Spyfall* suite is the best stuff here (some of its motifs drift in and out of other tracks) – much as the story itself was the best and most joyous of the season – but even duff episodes like *Orphan 55* and *Praxeus* are gifted powerful and emotive scores – and the pacy, urgent music of *Fugitive of the Judoon* deftly captures the constantly surprising and unpredictable turns of the episode's plot. Consistently inventive, often heart-poundingly thrilling, and only very occasionally drifting into a wall of sonic fuzz, the Series 12 soundtrack is a huge step up from Akinola's forgettable music for the previous series and really allows him to show what he's capable of when he's working with material that deserves and demands a high octane approach.

PAUL MOUNT

+++++ 8

POD PICK OF THE MONTH

The choice of podcasts to subscribe to these days is truly phenomenal. Naturally, you already listen to STARBURST's own output (right?), but what other audio pleasures await your ears? May we recommend...



James King is the chap behind *Re:Trek – Star Trek Reviewed, Revisited and Revered*. The show provides a uniquely English perspective on all things Star Trek. We caught up with him to find out more...

STARBURST: How would you describe the podcast to someone who's never seen Star Trek?

James King: It's that conversation we've all had where a group of friends talk about something they're passionate about. Sometimes that's football, sometimes it's politics, this time it's *Star Trek*. We try not to take ourselves too seriously and we try to give our honest opinion. Whether we're covering a classic episode or a dreadful one, it all comes from a place of love for the show.

Where did the idea for the show come from?

Doctor Squee - one of the original hosts and now recurring guest star - was doing a 24-hour podcast marathon for charity and had the crazy idea of discussing all thirteen *Trek* movies in two hours. He recruited myself and Elliot to host the segment and it was great. Sadly, we only managed to cover four of the films, but we had that much fun that we decided that we'd need a separate podcast to finish the job. By the time we

finished the films, *Discovery* was on the air so one thing led to another and we're still going over a year later.

What's the best Star Trek episode ever made?

Wow, that's not an easy question to answer. There's 700+ to choose from. I'd have to say that the best episodes are the ones that tell us something about what it means to be human, so with that in mind you can't really go wrong with *The Measure of a Man* from *The Next Generation*.

What's the most interesting adventure you ended up thanks to the show?

The first convention we attended as press was incredible. We got to meet the organisers and see how running a huge event is handled behind the scenes. We also got to meet the guests and record some interviews for the show. For life long geeks it's a dream come true.

How did you all meet?

Myself and Elliot are step-brothers and we've always shared a love of sci-fi. We have probably spent at least an hour talking *Trek* every week for the last twenty-five years, the difference now is that we record it! I met Squee when we appeared together on a panel discussing Marvel vs DC at a convention a few years ago. I was familiar

with his *Doctor Who* podcast *Gallifrey Stands* and we hit it off. A few months later was when he was organising his podcasting marathon, he called me and asked if I wanted to be a part of it. Since then Nicola - Squee's partner - joined to discuss the movies and the two of them often pop back for special episodes.

Why Star Trek?

For me, *Star Trek* epitomises what all good sci-fi should do, it makes you think. It also offers a positive view of a future where we can overcome our differences and stand stronger together. It's always been a good message but I think it's one we need now more than ever.

What's special about the Trek community that makes it different from similar fandoms?

The sense of a shared ethos. Most *Trek* fans not only love the show but they take away lessons from the episodes and live by them. I think Trekkies, Trekkers, or whatever term you want to use are people who not only love *Star Trek* but people whose lives in some way have been changed by it.

What's the hardest part about making Re:Trek?

When there's a new show airing, such as *Picard*, the challenge is to keep to a schedule. The show might drop on a Friday which means we have to have our episode recorded, edited, and uploaded in less than a week which doesn't give a lot of time to think about what we're going to say. When it's an older episode we're covering, the challenge is to find something new to say. When you look at an episode that aired over fifty years ago, there's a lot that's already been said!

What other projects are you working on?

Squee and Nicola are just about to launch a new interview podcast, *The Doctor Squee Show*, and for the minute the sheer amount of *Star Trek* being produced is keeping the rest of us busy. In the future, I'd like to look at expanding to cover other areas of pop culture. I'm talking to a friend about a *Buffy* the

Vampire Slayer podcast but that's still a way off for now.

Where did your love for Star Trek begin?

Sky TV began repeating the Original Series and my dad wanted me to tape them for him to watch. As it happened, I was off school that week with flu so ended up watching them each day. At the weekend, I found I was missing them and couldn't wait for Monday and the next episode. I've been an avid fan since then.

In an arena death-match, which Trek captain would win? Assume all of them are available.

Sisko! Anyone who can punch Q has got to stand a fair chance right?

What's your favourite thing about Star Trek?

The lessons it teaches you. In my formative years I think I learned more from *Star Trek* about how to be a better person than I did from almost anything else.

How has the response from the community been?

Amazing, we are steadily gaining listeners, which is incredible to think that other people want to hear our thoughts. It's very humbling.

What are you listening to at the moment?

My go-to *Trek* podcast is *The Star Trek Wars* podcast, where they pit one episode of each show against each other every week. Amazingly, they are on Season 7, meaning they've reviewed nearly every single episode!

What does the future look like for all of you?

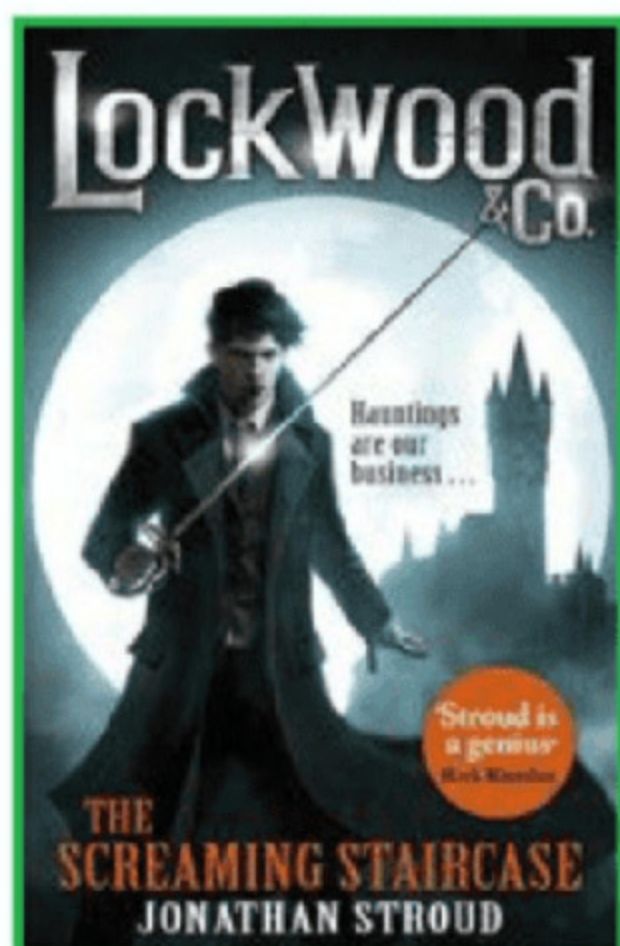
Hopefully bright. We love working together and with the amount of new *Star Trek* being produced, not to mention fifty years of archive material, it's not very likely we'll run out of things to talk about.

What ways can we get the show?

We're available on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, and Soundcloud. You can drop us a line on Twitter @retrekpod or join our Facebook page, just search for *Re:Trek*.

Words: Ed Fortune

BRAVE NEW WORDS



Edgar Wright to Adapt Works from Tade Thompson, Stroud, and Chakraborty

Scott Pilgrim director Edgar Wright has formed a production company that will be adapting the works of top sci-fi and fantasy authors into TV shows for Netflix. Wright is joined by long-time collaborators Joe Cornish, Nira Park, and Rachael Prior. The company will be called Complete Fiction. Jonathan Stroud's supernatural action-adventure detective series **Lockwood & Co** will be the first set of books to get adapted this way. The series will be overseen by Cornish. Also on the list is the sci-fi horror trilogy **The Murders of Molly Southbourne** from novelist Tade Thompson, and **The City of Brass** from author S.A. Chakraborty. The latter is heavily inspired by Islamic folklore and is a deep and involved read - we can't wait to see what it looks like on screen.

Neil Gaiman Annoys Everyone by Going Home

Millionaire author Neil Gaiman has come under criticism for breaking quarantine guidelines in order to return to his home on the Isle of Skye. The author travelled 11,000 miles whilst 'masked and gloved' from New Zealand, where he was staying in lockdown with his wife Amanda Palmer and four-year-old son Ash. The author has described his relationship with Palmer as 'going through a rough patch'. The journey broke

Scotland's rules, and Gaiman has since received a visit from local police. He has described the people of Skye as 'incredibly kind' in regards to the situation. Gaiman has since apologised for his journey, saying "Since I got here, Skye has had its own tragic Covid outbreak - 10 deaths in a local care home. It's not set up to handle things like this, and all the local resources are needed to look after the local community. So, yes. I made a mistake. Don't do what I did. Don't come to the Highlands and Islands unless you have to."

Adrian Tchaikovsky Wins BSFA Award

Adrian Tchaikovsky has won the 2019 British Science Fiction Association Award for his novel **Children of Ruin**. The award for Best Shorter Fiction went to **This is How You Lose the Time War** by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone (Jo Fletcher). The Award for Best Non-Fiction went to Farah Mendlesohn for her book **The Pleasant Profession of Robert A. Heinlein** and Fangorn (aka Chris Baker) won the award for Best Artwork for his cover of the book **Wourism and Other Stories** by Ian Whates.

Gollancz Announce BAME SFF Award Shortlist

Ben Aaronovitch and Gollancz have announced the eight shortlisted titles for the inaugural Gollancz and Rivers of London BAME SFF Award. The list has been assembled from 220 entries. The finalists are:

Blood of the Wolf by Jaya Martin

Kali's Call by Dolly Garland

Nowhere More Changeable than the Mortal Heart by Ewen Ma

Seeds of Heaven by Victor Ogana

The Principles of Moments by Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson

The Reeves' Guild by Kyla Jardine

The Scent of Cloves by Dan Buchanan

The Shape of the World by Amy Borg

The top prize is £4,000 and a full critique of their submitted work and year-long mentoring through Gollancz. Second prize is £2,000 prize money and a full critique of their submitted work. The next five runners up will receive £800 prize money and a goodie bag of Gollancz books.

Eastercon 2021 Will be ConFusion

Concentric, the 2020 Eastercon, has been cancelled this year due to the global pandemic. Next year's Eastercon is already being planned, and will be called ConFusion. It will take place at the Hilton Metropole in Birmingham on April 2nd to 5th, 2021 and the Guests of Honour are Nik Vincent and Dan Abnett.

STARBURST Hero Award for Literature Launched

STARBURST Magazine is proud to announce the STARBURST Hero Award for Literature. This is an award given out to a member of the literary world whom we feel has made a valuable contribution to the community. The award will be presented at the same ceremony as STARBURST's Brave New Words Award. The award ceremony for 2020 will be part of the Edge-Lit Nine festival during November 7th and 8th, 2020 at the Derby Quad, or online if that is cancelled.

Comic Book Writers Welcome in SFWA

The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) will now accept active membership applications from comic book writers. The decision was made as part of the organisation's recent elections; over 95% of their current membership voted in favour of the decision.

Worldcon and Hugo Awards Go Online

Worldcon was meant to be in New Zealand this year; alas, like the rest of the world, it's closed right now. Luckily, the lovely organisers of the convention have teamed up with streaming service The Fantasy Network in

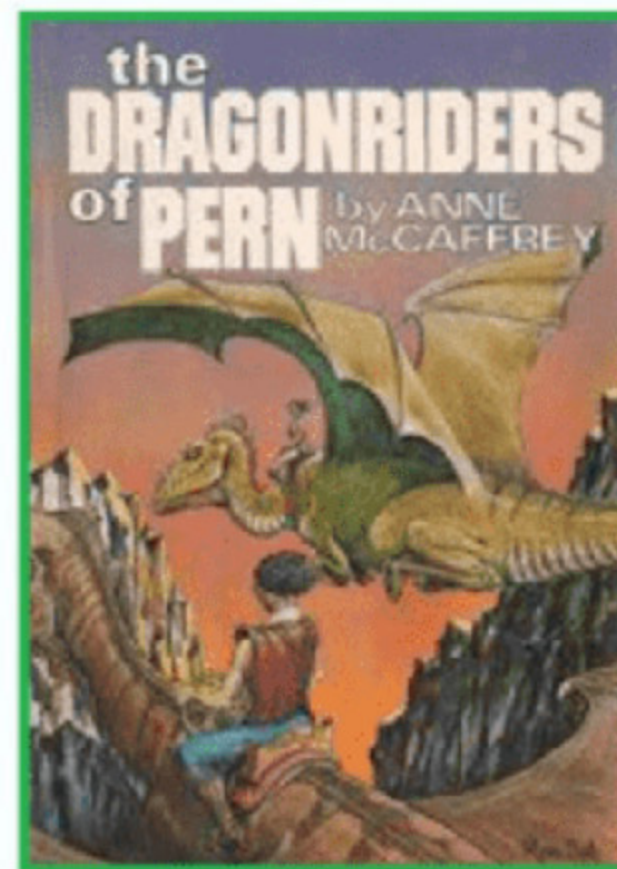
order to bring panels, hangouts, and of course, the Hugo Awards to the fans. Cost of attending membership has been reduced to \$300NZ, and the event will still continue across its planned dates. The Fantasy Network is a hub for indie telefantasy shows, formed by the producers of web series such as **JourneyQuest** and **The Rangers**. It will be interesting to see how this incredible technical challenge is handled.

New Pterosaur Name Inspired by GAME OF THRONES

A new genus Pterosaur will now be called Targaryendraconia, inspired by the House Targaryen from George R.R. Martin's **A Song of Ice and Fire** series. Martin, who is apparently a huge fan of all things dinosaur related, has been described as 'delighted' by the news.

Gollancz to produce DRAGONRIDERS OF PERN Audiobooks

Gollancz will publish Anne McCaffrey's original **Dragonriders of Pern** trilogy in audiobook format. Former **Doctor Who** companion Sophie Aldred will be doing the voice work, and the audiobooks are expected to appear later this year.



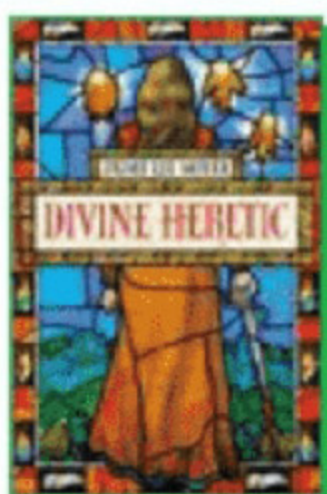
Catch our very own irregular book podcast, **Brave New Words**, via the STARBURST website, or tweet us @radiobookworm and follow our Instagram at **Brave_New_Words**.

COMING SOON



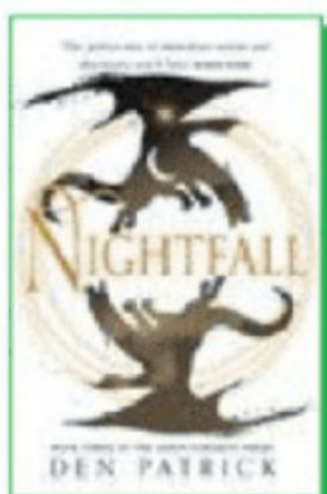
SCIONS OF THE EMPEROR: AN ANTHOLOGY
AUTHORS: DAVID GUYMER, DAVID ANNANDALE,
GUY HALEY, IAN ST. MARTIN, GAV THORPE, DARIUS
HINKS, JAMES SWALLOW, CHRIS WRIGHT
PUBLISHER: BLACK LIBRARY
RELEASE DATE: AUGUST 20TH

Yes, the **Horus Heresy** books are still going because people are still reading them. They tend to shine with the short story collections as these are almost always the most accessible parts of the series. This is a collection of tales about the Primarchs, the mighty demi-gods of the **Warhammer 40,000** setting. Tales include Guilliman dealing with his other father and the mystery of the Rangdan Xenocides. From a neophyte trying to capture the beauty of Sanguinius in a painting to the long dark night of Konrad Curze, this should be quite a memorable collection.



DIVINE HERETIC
AUTHOR: JAIME LEE MOYER
PUBLISHER: JO FLETCHER BOOKS (E-BOOK)
RELEASE DATE: AUGUST 20TH

Joan of Arc's story is one that anyone with even a passing knowledge of history is familiar with. Jaime Lee Moyer has a different take on the truth behind the legend. Our tale begins with Jeanne aged only five, meeting the angels and Saints and embracing her destiny. Though only a humble shepherd's daughter, she will defy her fate and the divine will to forge her own path and rewrite destiny. Or will she? Is the price that France's fated hero must pay simply too high? Not everyone is destined to be a hero. Sometimes you have no choice.



NIGHTFALL
AUTHOR: DEN PATRICK
PUBLISHER: HARPER VOYAGER
RELEASE DATE: AUGUST 20TH

Den Patrick returns with the third book in his **Ashen Torment** series. This latest instalment begins with the sky filled with dragons. The status quo is on fire. Monsters have been released into the ocean and the world has become forever changed. The heroes of the previous books edge ever closer to their fates. But the Emperor will not surrender gently and he does not care if he takes the world with him on the way. With stakes this high, this is sure to be a stunning conclusion. Just the sort of thing we've come to expect from a modern master of the genre.



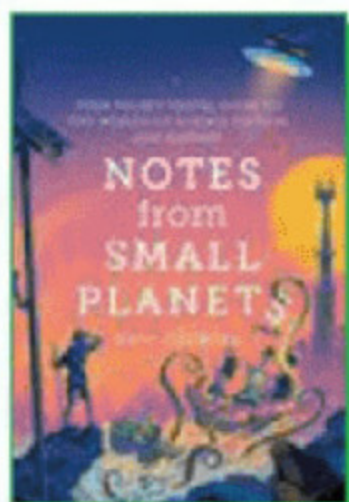
A KILLING FROST
AUTHOR: SEANAN MCGUIRE
PUBLISHER: DAW BOOKS
RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 1ST

The Toby Daye series has gotten to its fourteenth novel with **A Killing Frost**. This time around, October has to invite her enemy, Simon Torquill to her wedding. Something to do with weird fey law making him her father somehow. Presumably it's not as simple as re-arranging the table placements. Daye has to balance her feelings with her responsibilities in order to get things done and keep the Kingdom in the Mists safe. Expect all the thrilling action that made the last baker's dozen of books so interesting and not an extended conversation about what songs the DJ is going to play.



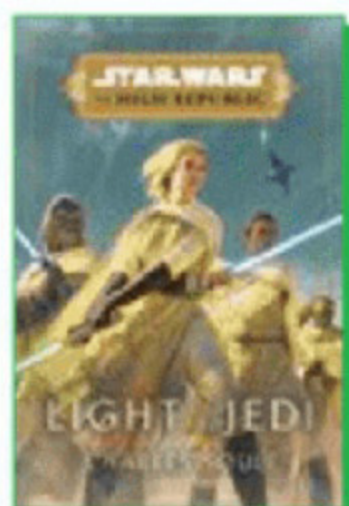
ORFEIA
AUTHOR: JOANNE M. HARRIS
PUBLISHER: GOLLANCZ
RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 3RD

Joanne Harris can easily be described as a world class author with a string of awards to her name, and her name on the cover pretty much guarantees a good read. Her most recent series of books have been rather beautiful re-imaginings of well-known myths and legends in novella form. **Orfeia** blends the classic tale of Orpheus with the story of a mother's loss, one that has been stolen for her by faeries. Expect music and mythology blended into a skilful tale. Stunningly illustrated by Bonnie Helen Hawkins, this promises to be an immersive and memorable experience.



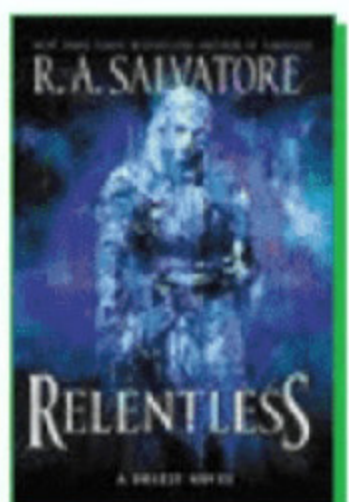
NOTES FROM SMALL PLANETS
AUTHOR: NATE CROWLEY
PUBLISHER: HARPER VOYAGER
RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 3RD

Nate Crowley is rather good at writing stories that are funny, weird, and clever. His previous work includes a nostalgia game book for games that never existed and a book about whaling that would put you off **Moby Dick** forever. His latest release is a guidebook for any fantasy traveller. Don your fiction suit and journey into misty mountains. Step through a wooden box and don't miss any of the sights. Whether you're a doom lord on a budget or man of infinite wealth and taste, **Notes from Small Planets** is your pastiche passport through the best worlds of science fiction and fantasy.



LIGHT OF THE JEDI
AUTHOR: CHARLES SOULE
PUBLISHER: CENTURY
RELEASE DATE: AUGUST 25TH

The eagerly anticipated **High Republic** series begins with **Light of the Jedi**. A whole new take on **Star Wars**, set 200 years before the events of **The Phantom Menace**. This new series could easily be the start of something rather wonderful, and promises to be the tales of Jedi doing cool things that we've always wanted. At the time of writing, all the publicity seems incredibly vague; we have no idea what the main threat to the Jedi will be or what direction this series is intended to go in, but we look forward to finding out!



RELENTLESS
AUTHOR: R.A. SALVATORE
PUBLISHER: HARPER VOYAGER
RELEASE DATE: AUGUST 20TH

At this point, you either know who Drizzt Do'Urden is or you never will. And if you do know about the iconic **Dungeons & Dragons** dark elf, then we're pleased to report that you are, in fact, a massive nerd. But that's okay, because that also means that Vin Diesel is, so there. **Relentless** is the conclusion of Salvatore's most anticipated Do'Urden story yet, containing elements of time travel and affairs that even the gods of the Forgotten Realms won't touch. This is a simply must-read conclusion to a series of books that have been an essential part of many a fantasy fans lives so far.

BOOK WORMHOLE

A MONTHLY PICK
OF GENRE FICTION
BY KATE FATHERS

A book for anyone who has heard the horns of Elfin
in the distance at twilight — Neil Gaiman



Sylvia Townsend Warner

Kingdoms of Elfin

Mannerpunk is where fantasy meets Jane Austen. A subgenre of fantasy, mannerpunk stories see fantastical creatures like fairies and witches engage in comedies of manners. Instead of bloody battles, there are wars of wits. Instead of perilous quests and doom-saying prophecies, there's biting social commentary. And a prime example of mannerpunk is Sylvia Townsend Warner's 1977 collection *Kingdoms of Elfin*.

The stories in *Kingdoms of Elfin* are loosely connected. Each story is a moment in a different fairy kingdom - a life of a changeling or a single trip gone awry - and while Warner occasionally repeats kingdoms, there is no overarching

protagonist or big theme. If the stories do share a focus, it's how humans impact the fairy world, as each story has some kind of meeting between fairies and humans. While this is common enough in fairy tales and fantasy stories, Warner distinguishes her collection in one key way: the fairies are the protagonists. Instead of following humans as they stumble into the fairy world, Warner shows us fairy life from the inside, and how they feel when they encounter human interlopers. Warner completely turns the traditional fairy story around, at least in the beginning, as just like humans encroach on fairy life, humans become a bigger part of the stories, until the collection

finally ends with *Foxcastle*, a story told entirely from a human's point of view.

And just like the characters in *Foxcastle*, your time reading about fairy life doesn't leave you unchanged. By the time you reach the end of *Kingdoms of Elfin*, you know how fairies think. You know their customs, their passions, and their motivations, and when you finally get a story from a human perspective, you actually feel disconnected from the human character. Warner spirits you away just like fairies do, and one of the main reasons is that the collection is not only a fairy story - it's a history book. Warner peppers each story with details about fairy society and biology, showing readers how diverse it is across kingdoms, but also how similar. She tells us how all fairy societies are split in two: aristocratic fairies and 'working fairies'. She tells us how working fairies fly, and how one kingdom maintains the traditions from ancient Persia, where fairies originated, and she tells us how fairies don't have souls. Warner pulls a lot from folklore and myth, legitimising her stories by including famous fairy names like Titania and Puck, but she also makes these myths her own by adjusting the details; Warner's fairies, instead of fitting in your hand, top out at four feet tall. These historical details not only make Warner's fictional world more three-dimensional, they make you feel like you have a greater understanding of a real society. They make you feel like you're studying a real species.

However, Warner doesn't just describe fairy society to make her stories well-rounded; she uses fairy society to comment on human society. Specifically, human aristocracy. Most of Warner's fairy characters are aristocratic - queens and ladies and changeling Favourites - and Warner gleefully takes jabs at not only them, but the court they're surrounded by. When discussing how aristocratic fairies have trouble conceiving, she says that "Some speculative thinkers put this down to the fact that working fairies use their

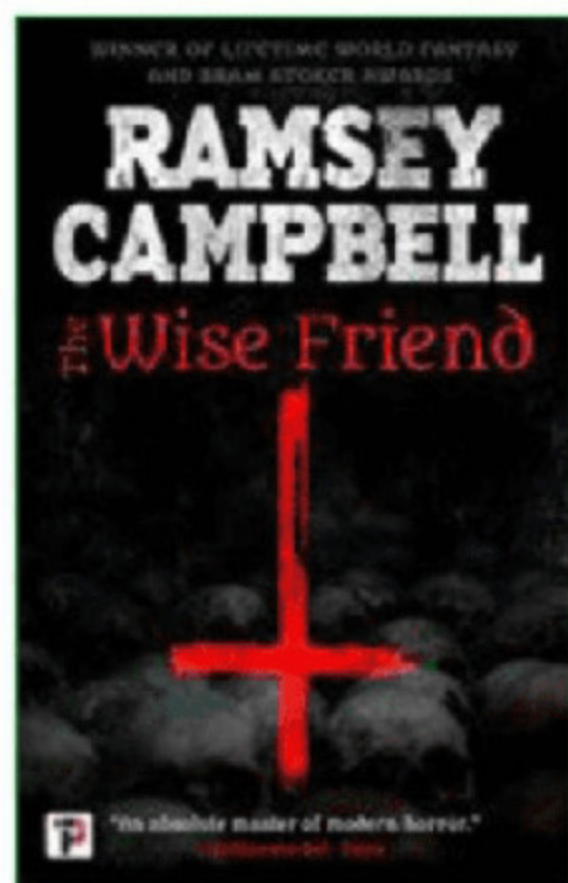
wings, pointing out that wrens, tits, sparrows, etc., are notoriously fertile, whereas the pedestrian dodo is extinct." When the queen of Wirre Gedanken takes off to a health resort, she ditches "Banian [who] had been chosen to make one of her party till at the last moment he became a disappointment by coming out in an anxiety rash." In *The Power of Cookery*, a queen's impulsivity ruins her whole kingdom. And in *The Search for an Ancestress*, while conversing with a Persian fairy queen, a character thinks "All conversations with royalty are the same... he had already told two lies." Warner's aristocracy is flighty and cruel, rash, selfish, and superficial, and while there is no climactic condemnation of their individual behaviour or their class as a whole, and nothing in the aristocracy changes, Warner's observations come together to create a really scathing comment on the aristocracy. It's clear that, to Warner, they have only one good function: entertainment.

Kingdoms of Elfin reads like a fairy tale and instructs like a history book, and while both of these things work beautifully together, they also highlight the collection's single issue: it tells more than it shows. As the stories were written throughout the 1970s, I expected a more modern narrative, with a better balance between description and dialogue. While it's clear that Warner is playing into old fairy tale traditions, and you can't help but appreciate what she's doing, I did wish that she let a little more modernity creep in.

Ultimately, *Kingdoms of Elfin* is a beautiful group of short stories. Warner's use of language is often poetic, and her plots are gripping, and while it's not entirely what I expected, it's a collection that I know I'll return to. In addition to short stories, Sylvia Townsend Warner is also the author of poetry collections, a biography of T.H. White, and novels such as *Lolly Willowes*; or *The Loving Huntsman*, *After the Death of Don Juan*, and *Mr Fortune's Maggot*.

THE LATEST RELEASES
REVIEWED AND RATED

REVIEWS



THE WISE FRIEND

AUTHOR: RAMSEY CAMPBELL
PUBLISHER: FLAME TREE PRESS
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

It is not overstatement to describe Ramsey Campbell as a master of horror. His back catalogue is impressive,

as are the many awards he has earned. He has a powerful reputation for being able to write delightfully creepy stories and his latest work, *The Wise Friend*, certainly lives up to that reputation.

The Wise Friend is told from the perspective of Patrick, a middle-aged and divorced professor of literature who has not had the easiest of childhoods. His aunt Thelma was a well-known and well-loved artist who died in tragic circumstance. Patrick's son, Roy, was very young at the time it all happened and years later, both father and son find themselves drawn into the tangle of Thelma's life, both out of curiosity and out of a yearning for a sense of closure.

As the story unfolds, we learn that Aunt Thelma kept more than a few secrets and had a strong interest in the occult. Her research was

tied to the sort of everyday wild places that many of us walk past or ignore. Locations with charmingly British names like Monks Cross and Dancers Oak, run-down patches of the wild, mostly caught up in the urban sprawl. The sort of sites that even mundane and unimaginative types describe as haunted.

Roy is just a teenaged boy yet he becomes more and more fascinated with his Aunt's work and finds himself drawn into her moody and solitary art, which is famous for its mysterious figures and hidden messages. We get flashbacks to Patrick's childhood, and we slowly discover that all is not well and all is not what it should be.

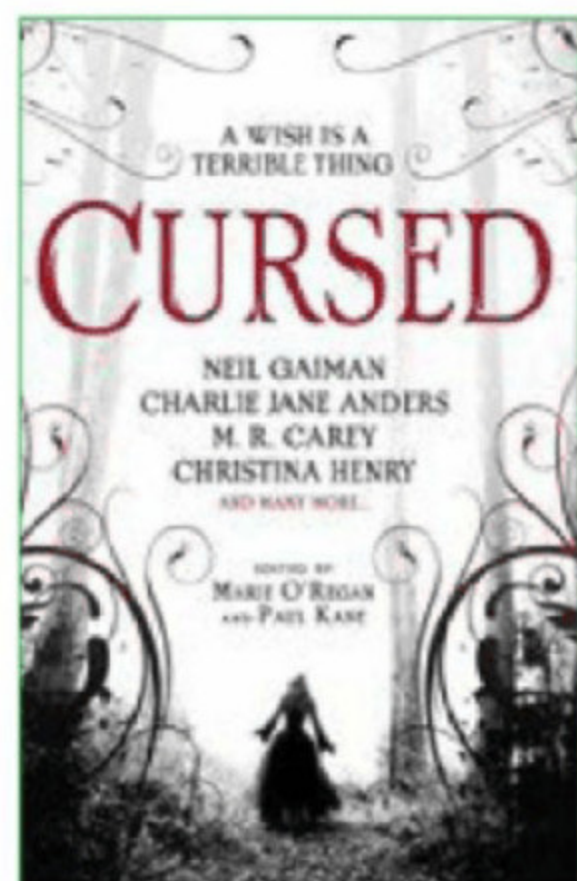
The writing is incredibly fluid and mesmerising. We get a mix between the mundane and the magical here; everyday people are mean, suspicious and fearful. Artists and dreamers possess

something special. There are a handful of flaws here, though it's mostly down to personal taste as some of the peril seems obvious. It's a style of story that doesn't really bluff its way into terror more so that it just makes you wait for the surprise until it's far too late for you to turn back.

The writing style is incredibly accessible and the whole work has this gentle yet steady tempo that just keeps you turning the page. It's one of those stories that builds up slowly, meaning that the tale lingers long after the book is done. A truly haunting tale and an example of a master at work. It's superb stuff. One of those books you're doomed to try and read in one sitting, so make sure you have your schedule clear.

ED FORTUNE

+++++ 9



CURSED: AN ANTHOLOGY

EDITORS: MARIE O'REGAN, PAUL KANE
PUBLISHER: TITAN BOOKS
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Editors Marie O'Regan and Paul Kane have gathered together eighteen short stories and two poems, all based around the theme of a curse. We may think we know what to expect - modern takes on the folk tales that have been with us for centuries, a new spin on the Brothers Grimm - but even when this is the case, the authors adapt the tropes for their own ends, to produce works of an incredibly high standard. Some of the stories create new monsters, which often prove too human for comfort; others have new styles of hex for the modern world, trouble for even the most mundane of people.

There isn't a rotten apple in this crop, most of which are

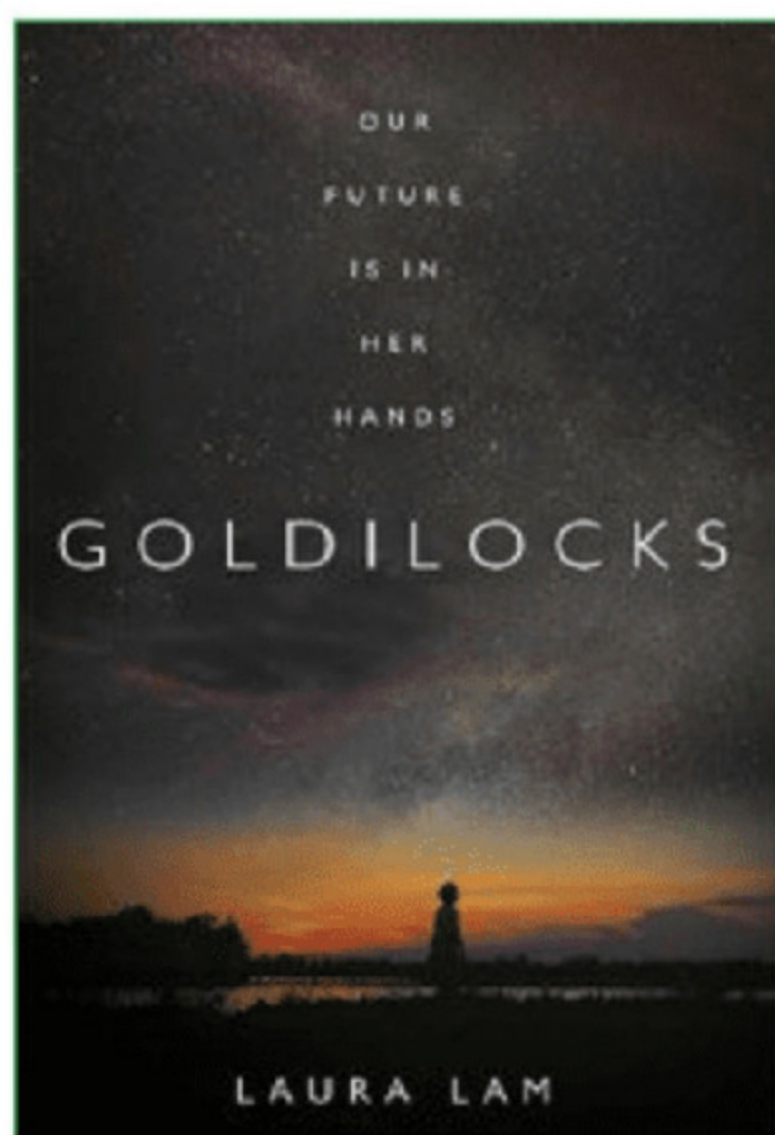
new to this collection, sitting alongside some old favourites from the likes of Neil Gaiman and Christopher Fowler. The same theme may run throughout, but there's a wide range on offer that will have readers shocked, sad, or even laughing. There isn't always an obvious moral message, and the reader is often left with food for thought, maybe contemplating 'what if?' along with a sense of wonder and entertainment that begins right from the very first page and never fades. The standard is so high that it creates a need to keep reading; just when you think you've been able to pick a favourite, another comes along, bringing a feast of ideas.

The editors have

assembled a fantastic collection here, one that offers an array of talent and is packed with stories that are all worthy of a return visit. *Cursed* is an anthology that certainly lives up to and surpasses expectations, with each tale creating its own unique atmosphere, treating the reader to unexpected developments and characters that will delight and thrill and ultimately satisfy. There is that sense of wanting more (as with all great fiction), but - as many of the stories will tell you - we have to be careful what we wish for.

ALISTER DAVISON

+++++ 10



GOLDILOCKS

AUTHOR: LAURA LAM
PUBLISHER: WILDFIRE
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

When an exosolar planet capable of supporting life is discovered, a spaceship crewed by five female astronauts is launched in the desperate hope of saving humanity from its ravaged home. The only problem is that the ship is stolen, and hidden secrets might end up

sabotaging the mission before the intrepid pioneers have even arrived.

Science fiction is often used as a mirror of society, reflecting back its issues in such a manner that makes them apparent while the fictional setting renders them palatable. In this very near future, climate change and overpopulation have destroyed the planet to the point that it has mere decades left, but many people refuse to believe the problem is real despite the mounting evidence, including billionaires with the resources to actually do something about it. Sound familiar?

The story is told by Naomi Lovelace, the ship's botanist, who is also the foster daughter of its captain, Valerie Black, a wealthy industrialist with whom she has a periodically antagonistic history gradually revealed in flashback chapters set in the run-up to the mission's launch and the years preceding it. These also serve to flesh out Naomi's backstory as someone willing to risk quite literally everything on a dangerous gamble that, one way or another, will see an end to her current life, making the story more about its interpersonal dynamics than its nevertheless realistic and meticulously researched space flight.

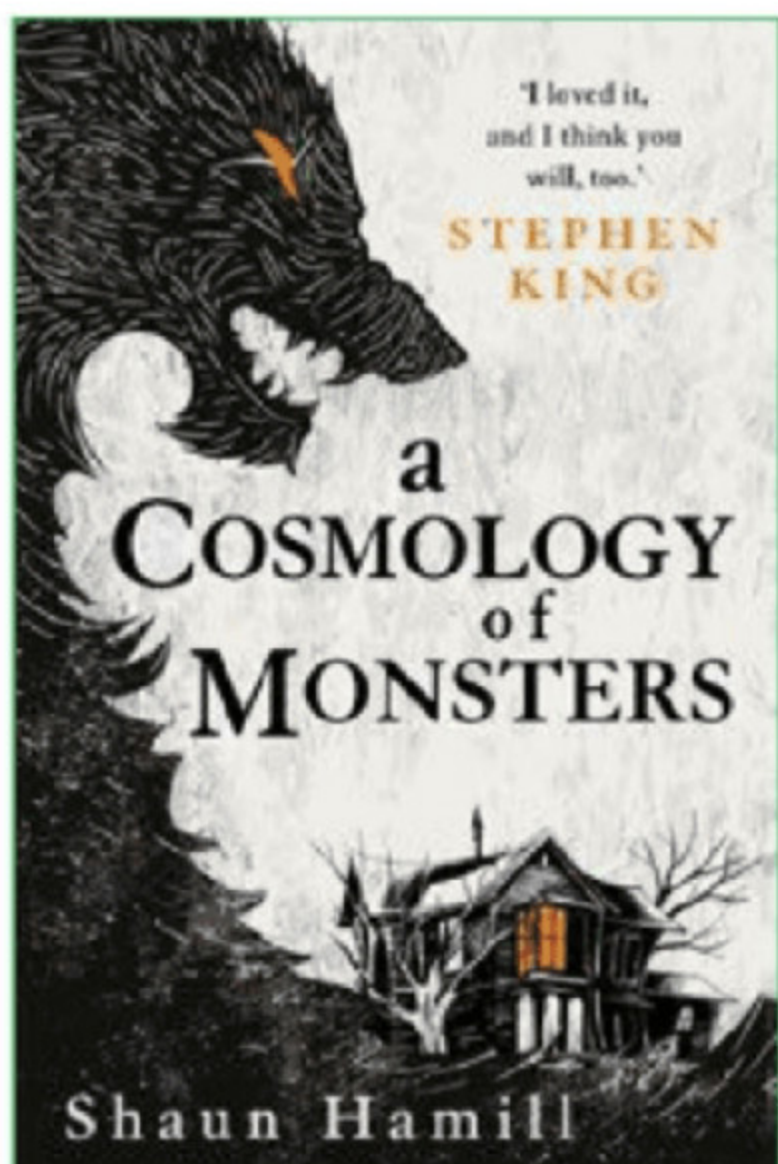
That all might be enough for one story, but the book also incorporates commentary on the rights of women, in particular reproductive rights, which here have been gradually eroded until the entire gender is perceived as an inferior choice for any kind of work and of little use other than as incubators for children. It's telling that there is no

single huge event that suddenly results in a reversal of societal development, but is, instead, tacitly portrayed as something that was insidiously brought about over time after the ascension to power of MRA types until it was accepted as standard. How jarring you consider this extrapolation from real world circumstances will largely depend on your own experience and/or understanding of the everyday disregard women are forced to endure by misogynists. Thus, rather than making some kind of statement, the single gender crew is a significant plot point doubling down on why their theft of the starship cannot be allowed to stand, leading to the omnipresent danger of pursuit being launched in addition to the inherent dangers associated with actually making the journey in the first place.

Goldilocks is a terrifyingly contemporary variation on the Dying Earth sci-fi subgenre, a timely commentary on society's treatment of women, a reiteration of the hope that the stars can save us, and a very human story where even the grandest of schemes can be brought low by human foibles. Best of all, it manages to be all these things at the same time and, like the planetary habitable zone its title references, it gets the balance just right.

ANDREW MARSHALL

+++++ 9



A COSMOLOGY OF MONSTERS

AUTHOR: SHAUN HAMILL
PUBLISHER: PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Noah's father was a horror fanatic, and building that homemade haunted house had become an obsession for him. Noah's mother hadn't been so sure but she played along, and the haunted house eventually became so successful that it turned into a family business. Even while he was dying, Noah's father was making plans to expand the attraction into an entire nightmarish city, and the sketches he drew were so heavily detailed that you'd almost believe he'd been there. Perhaps he had. But, through it all, Noah's mother and father never forgot the beast they'd seen before they were married. The robed creature with glowing orange eyes that seemed to be pursuing them...

Noah barely knew his father. Maybe that's why his Friend came to visit him – a robed beast with glowing orange eyes that he doesn't tell anybody else about. Even when he suspects the beast may have something to do with the disappearance of his sister, Sydney, he still says nothing. Because Noah loves the beast, and when the beast reveals the beauty inside he loves his mysterious Friend even more.

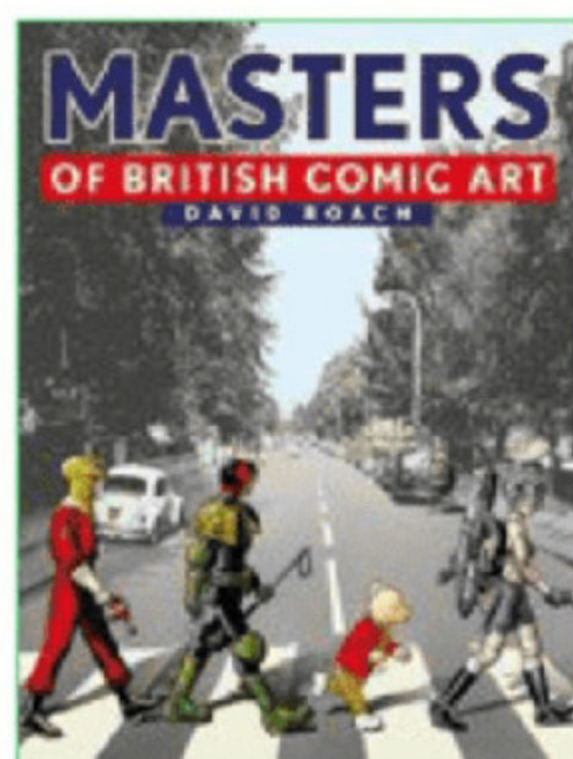
But as more of the townspeople

begin to disappear and a group called the Fellowship of the Missing suspects Noah knows more than he's telling them, how will he be able to keep his secret safe? What sacrifices will he have to make, to protect the ones he loves from the one he loves?

A Cosmology of Monsters is a twisted coming-of-age story that's effective because it's so achingly human. In fact, for the first two thirds of the novel, debut author Shaun Hamill barely puts a foot wrong. It's only when Cosmology turns into a lycanthropic fairytale, with a pivotal encounter that reads like a jarring comic book beat 'em up, that the story threatens to slip into a less satisfying groove. However, the quality of the writing remains strong throughout, so maybe our small misgivings can be put down to reader preference. As a slow-burn fantasy that's also a joyous celebration of the horror child inside all of us, A Cosmology of Monsters definitely hits the mark.

IAN WHITE

+++++ 8



MASTERS OF BRITISH COMIC ART

AUTHOR: DAVID ROACH
PUBLISHER: REBELLION
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

David Roach's Master of British Comic Art is as much curated as authored, gathering some 200 of its 385 pages of work from artists past and present. In some respects, the book is a long-overdue reply to P.R. Garriock's 1978 Masters of Comic Book Art, a much slimmer volume that opened many fans' eyes to the diversity of comic book illustration including works by Moebius, Eisner, and Britain's own Barry Windsor-

Smith and Frank Bellamy. It can't be a coincidence that Roach's new book reproduces a page from Dan Dare that has a panel that Garriock's book used for its cover. Windsor-Smith and Bellamy are the only artists to appear in both books.

It is not just the focus on British artists that makes Roach's work different from its Seventies counterpart. There is an air of nostalgia and loss in Masters of British Comic Art that comes partly from the demise of many of the creators being celebrated but also the terrible loss of comics themselves. It is not surprising that the book contains a great many versions of Judge Dredd as the character represents virtually the only surviving comic title in the UK (although the Commando pocketbook line is still available from good newsagents everywhere - whatever a 'newsagent' is these days!).

Roach's collection obviously reflects available material, rights, and the author's own interests although the latter are at their most diverse here. Still, the book needed pages more devoted to the humour/

cartoon genre and there are notable omissions, especially from the long-running Doctor Who Magazine strip. That said, the book does contain examples of Jon Pertwee's Doctor from the painterly Gerry Haylock (TV Action) and Harry Lindfield (Countdown).

In many ways, Britain has been a great home for comics. It has benefitted from reprints from the American superhero genre, perennially popular European strips such as Tintin and Asterix but also, as Roach demonstrates, an incredibly rich history of indigenous art and comic publishing including the wonderful silliness of Ken Reid and Leo Baxendale in The Beano, Cor!, and Wham!, the illustrative realism of boys and girls adventure strips and the painterly tradition found on the covers of Look and Learn, The Sphere, and Once Upon a Time.

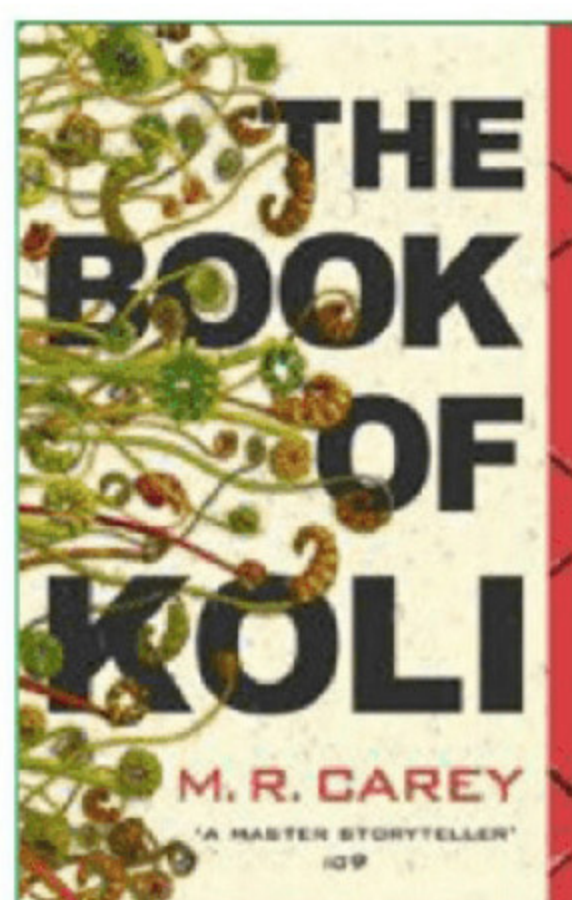
Roach's book is an education in comic illustration. The text pages are incredibly well-researched and take the reader on an informative and entertaining journey to a time when there were comics for everyone from the

so-called 'nursery' titles (Playhour, Pippin, Teddy Bear) though the comedic silliness of the Dandy, Buster, Sparky et al) to the thrills and spills of adventure strips for boys and girls (such as Lion and Misty) and the 'grown-up' world of Britain's underground including Street Comix and Sin City: Tales of Urban Paranoia.

Back in the day, Masters of Comic Book Art was an important validation of drawing comics as valuable contribution to popular visual culture. It's to be hoped that Masters of British Comic Art, through its research, archival work, and copious examples (often reproduced from original artworks) will further this process, although we suspect that Roach is preaching to the converted. Despite this, this is a must-have for anyone who takes pleasure in illustration and cartooning and a valuable souvenir of an industry on the brink of disappearing. Comics! Read 'em or lose 'em; ahh, too late, most have already gone.

TIM ROBINS

+++++++ 9



THE BOOK OF KOLI

AUTHOR: M.R. CAREY
PUBLISHER: ORBIT
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Mike Carey is no stranger to apocalyptic sci-fi. He is best

known for his book (and inevitable movie adaptation of) The Girl With all the Gifts. Thankfully, Carey's latest novel (the first in a planned trilogy), is not about a horrific viral outbreak. Instead, it's about the folly of trusting too much in technology that you don't understand and taking on too much too soon. A classic sci-fi trope, but given the sort of clever twist we've come to expect from Carey.

Set in the far future, mankind has adapted following an unspecified environmental apocalypse. Most of the biosphere is actively hostile to mankind. Even trees have to be killed repeatedly (mostly by poison) before their timber can be used. At some point in the past, mankind saved the world at the cost their own future. Conflict is still a thing, but there are so few people left that civilisation

is divided into villages, people rarely travel and everything on the face of it seems simpler. However, this is not a simple tale of a world gone strange, instead this is a more measured mystery, bundled with a touch of coming of age drama and some world class weird fiction.

Our hero is Koli Woodsmith, a young man who seeks to a better life for himself and the remains of his family. His home of Mythen Rood owns four pieces of ancient technology, each one, if wielded well, could vastly improve their lot in life. The heart of this story are the complications that arise from people trying to interact with things that are frankly beyond them. The book is told from Koli's perspective and yes that means he speaks in

a strange and futuristic patois, which can slow down the storytelling on occasion. Koli is a sympathetic character and knows just enough to know nothing, making him a fine person to tell the tale.

This is a tale in two parts. The first part focuses on letting the reader explore the world through Koli's eyes and the problems one would have growing up in such a strange world. Just as the reader gets a handle on things, the author cheerfully changes gears and the book moves from casual to utterly gripping.

The Book of Koli is a fine start to a fascinating world and we have high hopes for the next two novels.

ED FORTUNE

+++++++ 8

REVIEWS

THE LATEST COMIC
BOOK RELEASES
REVIEWED AND RATED



STAR WARS: THE RISE OF KYLO REN

WRITER: CHARLES SOULE

ARTIST: WILL SLINEY

PUBLISHER: MARVEL

FORMAT: TRADE PAPERBACK

RELEASE DATE: JULY 15TH

While the ending of Kylo Ren's story may have split fan opinion, he remains an intriguing character; the brutal leader of the First Order, consumed by destructive rage, troubled by inner conflict. This miniseries, now released in collected format, sheds light on his steps towards the dark side. It must be tempting, when writing such a prequel, to cover the character's whole backstory, from childhood to *The Force Awakens*. But knowing he has a mere four

issues to tell his story, writer Charles Soule wisely decides to focus on one key turning point in Ben's life.

After his destruction of Luke Skywalker's Jedi Temple, Ben is on the run and unsure of his next steps. Under advice from Snoke, who's pushing him towards the dark side, he seeks out the Knights of Ren. To be accepted into their ranks, he must prove himself, and fighting off the trio of Jedi pursuing him may grant such an opportunity.

This tightly plotted story adds substantially to our understanding of the character, while leaving some elements of mystery. Soule captures Ben's voice perfectly – the arrogance of a future Supreme Leader is starting to emerge, but he's also plagued by insecurities, pulled in different directions by conflicting influences.

There's also time spared for a flashback in which a younger Ben, along with Luke and Lor San Tekka, first encounters the Knights; Luke's at his Grand Master peak here and anyone who wanted more action from him in the sequel movies will be pleased.

Artist Will Sliney's compositions have a cinematic feel, while his convincing likeness of the young Ben is as emotive as any of Adam Driver's powerful performances. There are also some great new character and location designs, all made even better by Guru-eFX's colours – dramatic and foreboding but not gloomy.

KIERON MOORE

★★★★★★★★★★ 9



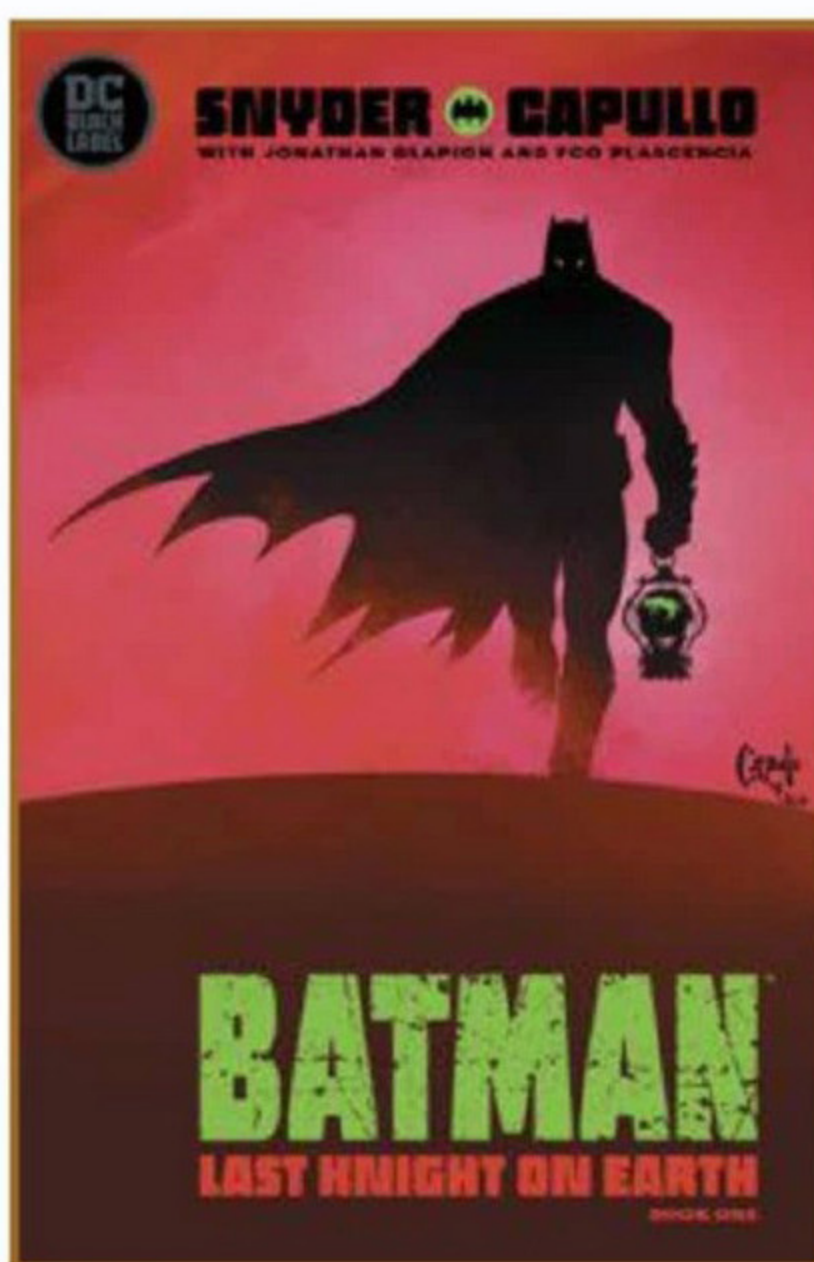
PUNISHER: SOVIET

WRITER: GARTH ENNIS
ARTIST: JACEN BURROWS
PUBLISHER: MARVEL
FORMAT: TRADE PAPERBACK
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

As Marvel's resident serial killer, Frank Castle doesn't have a whole lot of friends. Aside from the occasional begrudging team-up, the Punisher really doesn't play well with others. The more conventional superheroes tend to take umbrage with his murderous methods, and Frank himself doesn't have a whole lot of time for copycat killers. Here, Frank finally gets his bromance. Marking Ennis' big return to the character, this bloody thriller sees the Punisher investigate an apparent copycat killer taking down Russian mobsters – on his turf, no less. But in ex-soldier vigilante Valery Stepanovich, it looks like Frank might have actually found his Russian counterpart. Like some of Ennis's best Punisher stories, Soviet primarily operates as a grisly war thriller, taking in a grand conspiracy and extensive flashbacks that stretch all the way back to 1980s Afghanistan. This is no mere retread of Ennis' greatest hits, and an excellent story in its own right, quite unlike any of the writer's other Punisher tales. Ennis is very well matched with artist Jacen Burrows (having previously worked together on the repulsive but effective *Crossed*), and Burrows' Punisher is wonderfully stony-faced and intimidating. Naturally, the gore is in ample supply, and the violence in Soviet is some of the most brutal ever seen in a Punisher book. But it's the writing that shines. These days, Ennis is best served by his more serious war stories and crime books, and Soviet is no exception. This exciting, slightly horrifying action thriller is up there with some of the best Punisher stories ever told, and finds both writer and artist on top form. Frank too. Look, he made a friend and everything.

JOEL HARLEY

★★★★★★★★★ 9



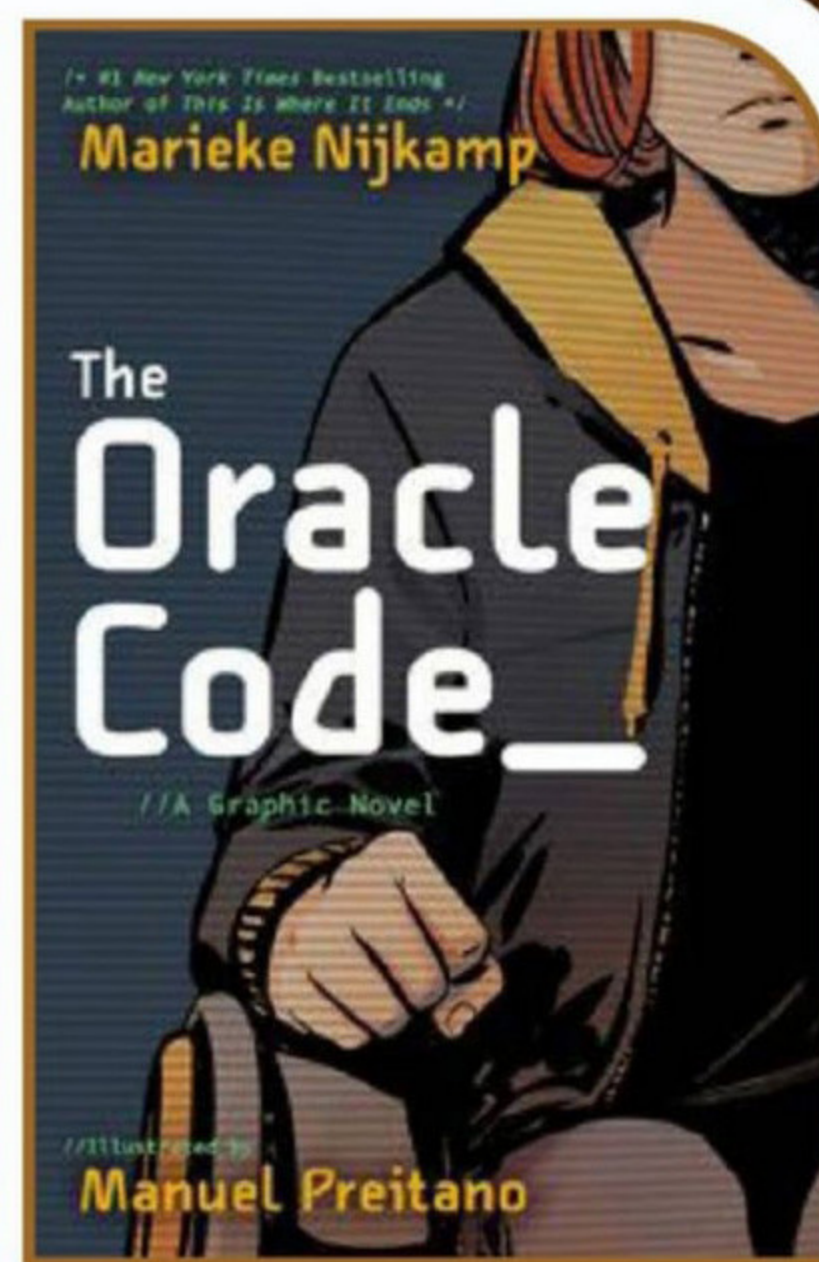
BATMAN: LAST KNIGHT ON EARTH

WRITER: SCOTT SNYDER
ARTIST: GREG CAPULLO
PUBLISHER: DC BLACK LABEL
FORMAT: HARDCOVER
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Twenty years in the future a young Bruce Wayne awakes in Arkham Asylum. Batman does not, nor has he ever existed, and Bruce is responsible for the death of his parents. So begins Snyder and Capullo's Dark Knight swan song. Their near-decade run chronicling Batman's adventures have undeniably proved to be immensely popular, but readers who aren't familiar with this duo's Bat oeuvre need not worry. Being a DC Black Label tale this falls outside of the main line's continuity and is very much standalone. Snyder has created DC's version of A Boy and His Dog. Whereas Harlan Ellison's tales featured Blood, a telepathic dog, accompanying Vic through a post-apocalyptic wasteland, Snyder gives us Joker's decapitated head as Batman's companion. He also serves as the story's narrator on Batman's quest to piece together the mystery of his past through a devastated world, and what a surreal tale it is, as Batman encounters futuristic versions of old friends, comrades, and enemies, travels the River of the Dead in Limbo, battles mindless Superman clones, and narrowly escapes the Speed Force Storm. It's a shame that after all the inventiveness and the fantastically bizarre shenanigans, the final chapter is really quite generic. However, Capullo's art has lost none of its edge. A body found in an alley is genuinely creepy, having a black and white horror film aesthetic thanks to the expert colouring of FCO Plascencia, and inking of Jonathan Glapion. For their final story together, Snyder and Capullo have done a more than admirable job. It's unfortunate that, just as with most of DC's films, the ending is somewhat lacklustre.

CHRISTIAN JONES

★★★★★★★★★ 7



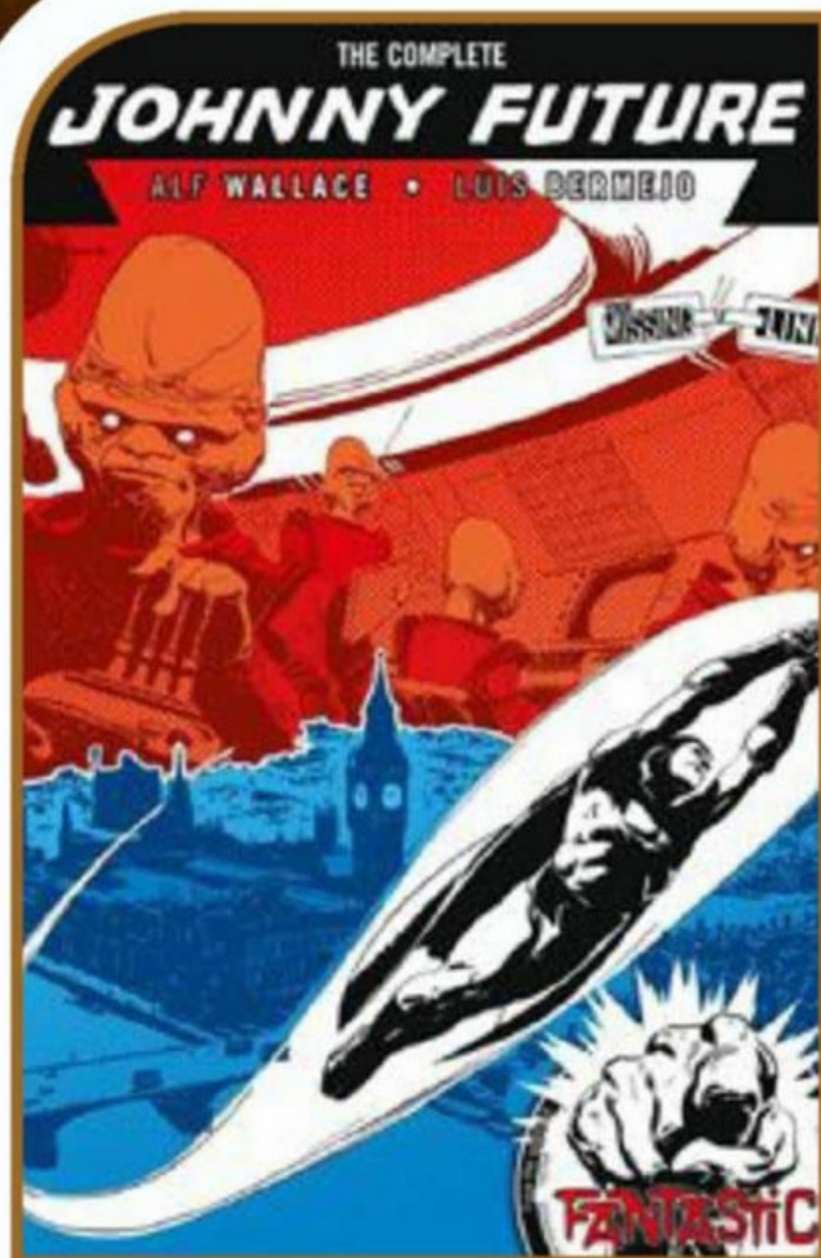
THE ORACLE CODE

WRITER: MARIEKE NIJKAMP
ARTIST: MANUEL PREITANO
PUBLISHER: DC INK
FORMAT: PAPERBACK
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

After being shot, teenager Barbara Gordon is admitted to the Arkham Center for Independence, a rehabilitation centre for Gotham youngsters. Here she will receive help and training to physically and mentally prepare her for her new life – a life in a wheelchair. As Barbara angrily comes to terms with her situation, she questions her identity. Is she the same person as before the shooting, who is she now that she no longer has the use of her legs, and who will she be in the future? When a patient disappears, and a mysterious child's voice echoes through the building throughout the night, Barbara becomes determined to discover the centre's sinister secrets. Nijkamp does a masterful job of combining a haunted house mystery with a story about a young girl adapting to life after a horrific incident. Although Barbara initially rejects friendship and help, not once does Nijkamp give us any course to dislike her. We are taken on Barbara's journey; a journey of rage, guilt, fear, and acceptance. As a novelist, she also excels at keeping a tight rein on exposition. The dialogue and internal monologue is enough to keep us informed without being intrusive. Preitano's art is exquisite in its simplicity and yet it's also deceptively detailed, with lots of details Bat-fans will appreciate. Jordie Bellaire's colour palette is suitably subtle; patients are shown in a single colour, while the main characters are in full colour, which automatically draws the eye. It's a technique that harks back to titles of yesteryear. The Oracle Code is a tale of identity, adversity, and revelation. Barbara reclaims her sense of self, she will not let her tragedy define her. Instead, it makes her stronger shaping her into the hero that she will become.

CHRISTIAN JONES

★★★★★★★★★ 9



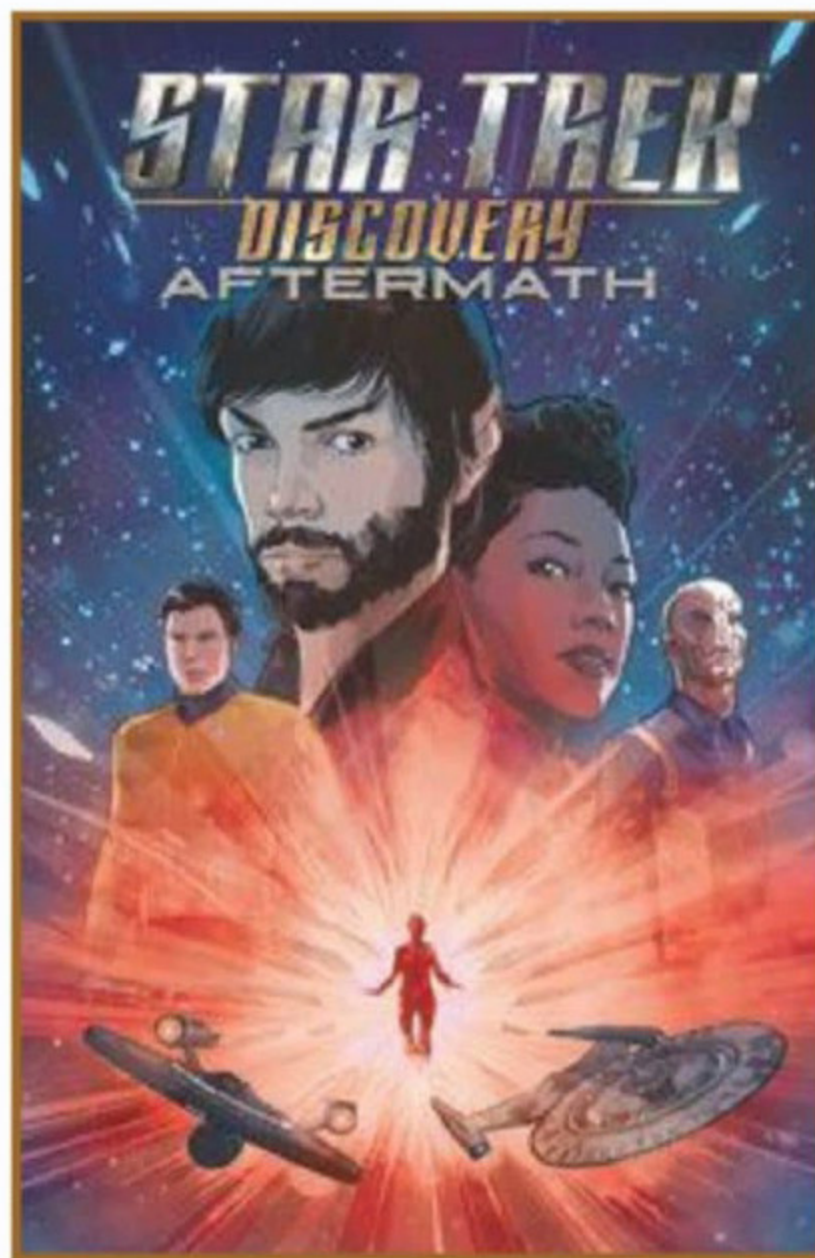
THE COMPLETE JOHNNY FUTURE

WRITER: ALF WALLACE
ARTIST: LUIS BERMEJO
PUBLISHER: REBELLION
FORMAT: HARDCOVER
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Rebellion Publishing has made it a mission of sorts to republish long-forgotten gems from Britain's comic book past. The British Treasury of Comics is a delightful range of books that keep unearthing all sorts of weird and wacky things. Johnny Future is a rather splendid example of this. First published in '60s-era comic book Fantastic, our black and white adventure story starts out as a remix of both King Kong and The Incredible Hulk called The Missing Link. This premise quickly runs out of steam, and the plot contrives instead to enthuse the 'link' with atomic powers. The book flirts briefly with the idea of being some sort of super-spy crime drama before diving straight into superhero cliché. It's actually pretty shameless, and this adds to the charm of the book. Johnny Future finds a cape from somewhere, and there's no real logic to the transition from mild-horror to crime drama to superhero, except that clearly, the writer thought it would make a more entertaining read. Johnny goes on to fight aliens, robots, and a disturbing amount of bad guys with mind-control powers. The real star here is Luis Bermejo's artwork. Bermejo would go on to be the artist behind Vampirella, and it really is fascinating to compare this earlier example of his art with the later horror-inspired comics. The book is mostly black and white, and it's quite a striking and engaging style. Despite all this, we wouldn't recommend you read Johnny Future in one sitting. Even though it changes styles so often you may get narrative whiplash, the stories aren't very deep, and the novelty wears off over time.

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★★★ 6



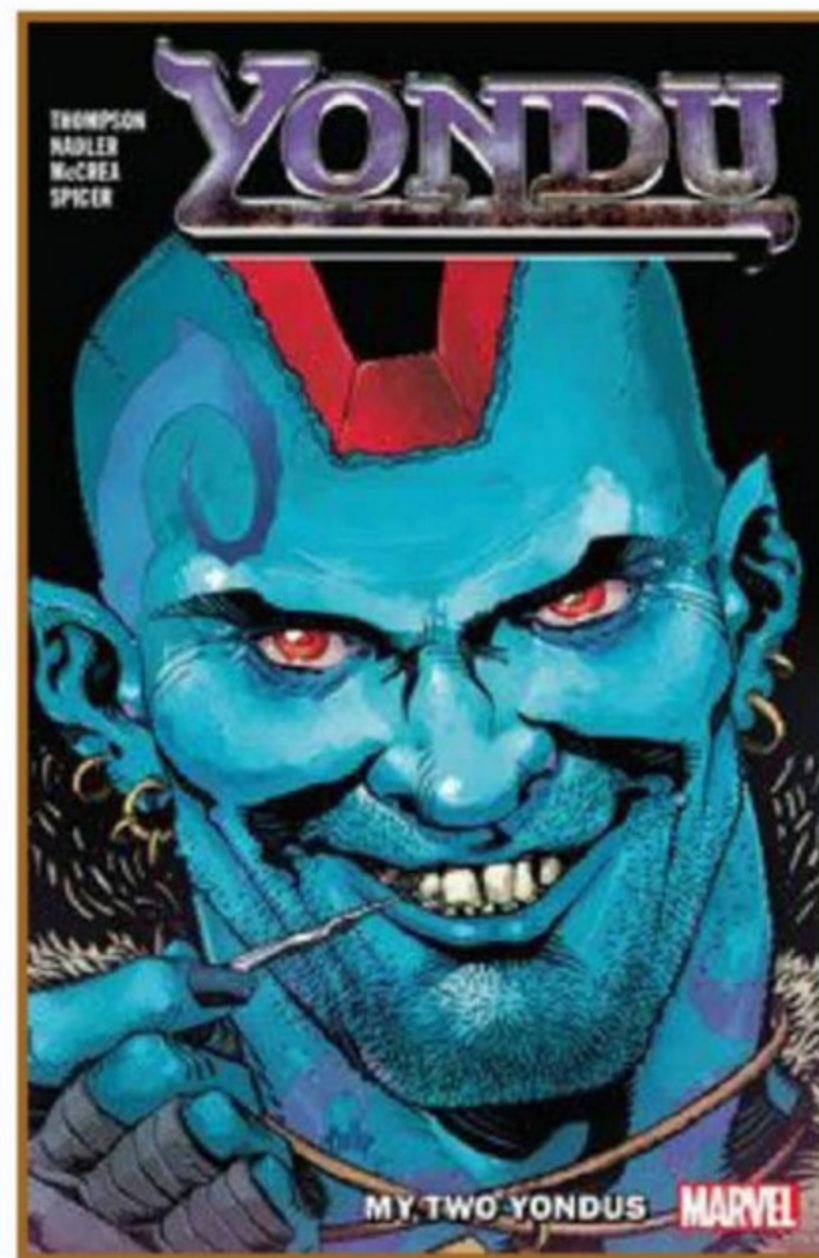
STAR TREK: DISCOVERY - AFTERMATH

WRITERS: KIRSTEN BEYER, MIKE JOHNSON
ARTIST: TONY SHASTEEN, ANGEL HERNANDEZ
PUBLISHER: IDW
FORMAT: TRADE PAPERBACK
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Following on from the end of Discovery's second season - which saw the titular starship and her crew catapulted forward in time 900 years - Aftermath picks up events with three characters left behind in the 23rd Century: Captain Pike, Spock, and Klingon Chancellor L'Rell. Pike wants to seize on the current good relations with the Klingons, and invites L'Rell to a peace conference. But both have other problems to contend with. L'Rell's position - even by Klingon standards, is by no means secure, and there's many who would like to see her removed from power, preferably by force. Pike, meanwhile, has to try and persuade an unsure Spock that he does indeed belong on the Enterprise. The problem with this (as much of Discovery's televised run to date), is that we already know the outcome. We know that Spock is on the Enterprise during the original series, and that lasting peace with the Klingons doesn't occur until much later. Still, the journey is entertaining, with attempts to sabotage the conference (foreshadowing Star Trek VI), the characters feel well-rounded (as indeed they should, co-author Beyer is one of the show's writers), there's an appearance from a young Kor (neatly circumventing the problem of his TOS look being worlds apart from Discovery's Klingons by giving him an excess of hair), and it results in a fun, diverting, if inconsequential read. For those missing the Discovery crew, there's also a short adventure set between the first and second seasons, where Saru (acting captain of the Discovery) is put to the test in a mission involving a missing Starfleet vessel and some pesky Orion pirates. It's entertaining but does little to flesh out the Kelpian beyond what we've already seen on screen.

IAIN ROBERTSON

★★★★★★★ 7



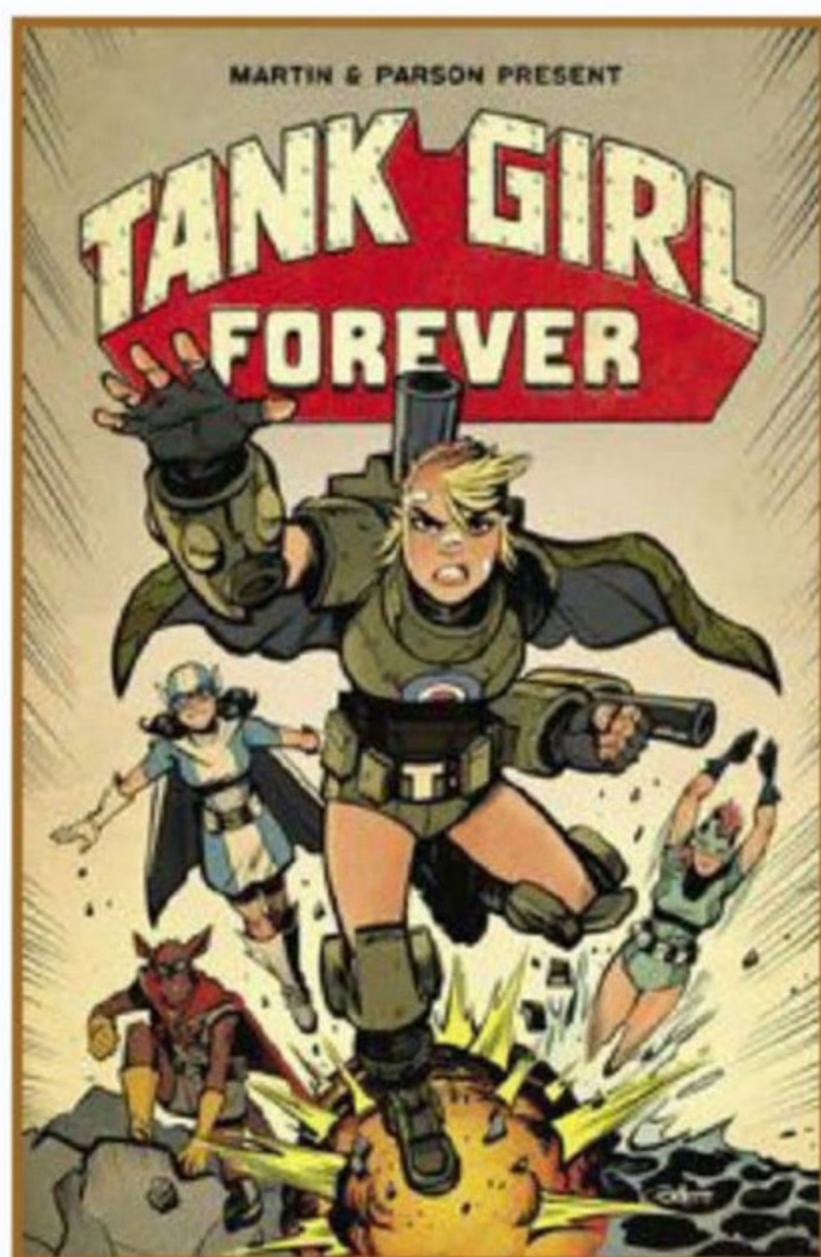
YONDU: MY TWO YONDUS

WRITERS: LONNIE NADLER, ZAC THOMPSON
ARTIST: JOHN MCCREA
PUBLISHER: MARVEL
FORMAT: TRADE PAPERBACK
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Thanks to the MCU, the character of Yondu is now best known as a bitter and tough-as-nails space pirate with a heart of gold. This was perhaps one of the most notable changes from the original comics - the 1970s Guardians of the Galaxy books featured Yondu as a super-advanced, spiritual, and wise noble warrior type from the distant future. Marvel Comics' new Yondu title attempts to address this inconsistency by positing that pirate-Yondu is a distant ancestor of the more iconic noble-Yondu. And, of course, it brings the pair of them together for a rip-roaring adventure. You can't have a story like this without some sort of galaxy-altering MacGuffin, and here we get The Herald's Urn, a green, glowing thing that can destroy worlds. This morbid piece of kit falls into the hands of pirate-Yondu who immediately intends to sell it to the highest bidder. This version of the character is instantly recognisable to moviegoers. He's rough, he says rude words, and he's only really out for himself. If you liked Dan Abnett's run on Guardians of Galaxy or enjoyed Lobo, you'll be familiar with this sort of thing. Of course, noble-Yondu turns up to tell pirate-Yondu that perhaps selling a weapon of cosmic mass destruction to strangers is a bad idea. Wackiness ensues. McCrea's art is consistently fun throughout. It's full of high energy action and filled with the inherent grottness that Marvel space travel seems to enjoy. McCrea does excellent sight gags and eye-popping violence, though it's never too gross or visceral. Thompson and Nadler's writing is strong, introducing cool new ideas, fixing a bit of continuity, and treating us to some exciting space battles. It's a little short, but then so is Yondu.

ANDREW DEX

★★★★★★★ 7



TANK GIRL FOREVER – VOL. 2

WRITER: ALAN MARTIN
ARTIST: BRETT PARSON
PUBLISHER: TITAN
FORMAT: TRADE PAPERBACK
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Tank Girl has always been deeply silly, rude and utterly different. It's had a typically British approach to the concept of canon, by which we mean it's one of those things that's quite happy to dump decades of backstory if it reckons it can get a good gag out of it. It's also been proudly off-the-beaten-path. Forever finally does the unthinkable by making Tank Girl a superhero. She has a suit of armour that gives her tank-themed powers. Her friends, Jet Girl and Sub Girl, have similar air and sea-themed kit and together they form a superhero team. Only not really. It's actually some sort of weird event triggered by some random Deus Ex Machina that the gang have decided to mess with because they're idiots. So we get Barney as a Goth-style villain, a sesame seed-shaped meteor coming to destroy Melbourne, and Booga heroically talking gibberish. We also get Tank Girl herself making fun of multiple comic tropes, while dressed in a variety of silly costumes. Though it doesn't quite dip into out-right satire, it does come close enough to be fun. Parson does a fantastic job with the art, even in the more ridiculous '60s-style Marvel moments the characters still remain visibly Tank Girl. Seems you can put a girl in tank-inspired Iron Man armour and keep the same punk style that makes the book so special. Parsons captures the character designs perfectly and doesn't try to mimic the approach of previous artists. Alas, the story isn't capable of maintaining a constant stream of silliness, eventually going completely off the rails into troubling territory. The art is gorgeous and the jokes are as funny as they were back in the '90s, but it's just a little too dark to be as fun as it should be.

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★ 6



STAR WARS: DOCTOR APHRA #1

WRITER: ALYSSA WONG
ARTIST: MARIKA CRESTA
PUBLISHER: MARVEL
FORMAT: SINGLE ISSUE
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Doctor Chelli Aphra is the Star Wars answer to Indiana Jones – except female, queer, and more morally dubious. She investigates the archaeological mysteries of the galaxy, always looking to make a credit. Her series now returns with a new creative team and a storyline set between Episodes V and VI.

There's no Triple-Zero or Beete-One this time round; the only returning characters are Aphra and Black Krrsantan, so this first issue has a lot of work to do to introduce their new gang. There's Detta Yao, an enthusiastic student wanting to prove her chops; Eustacia Okka, an old classmate of Aphra's looking to regain her professor job; and Just Lucky, who, erm, is lucky. Together, they set off to find the mythical Rings of MacGuffin – sorry, Rings of Vaale – but sadistic rich kid Ronen Tagge is on their tail.

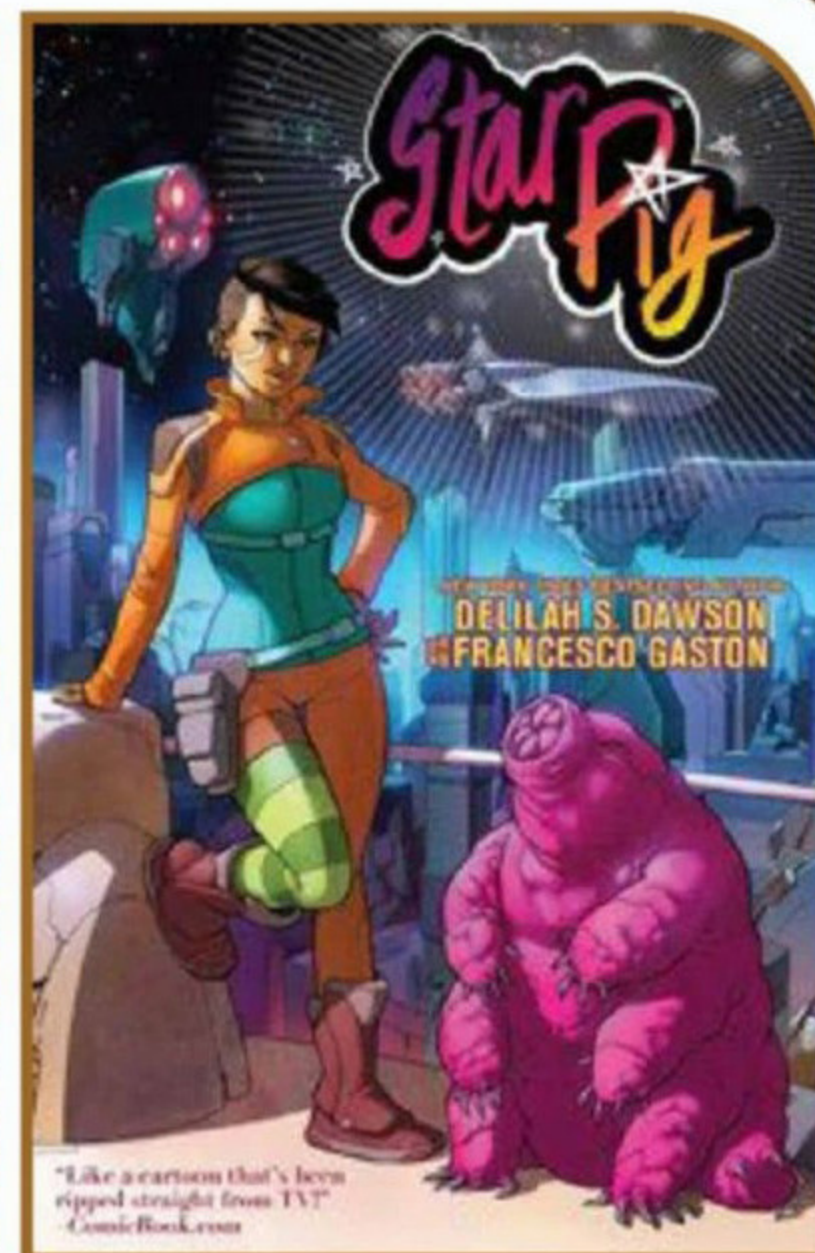
Aphra remains one of the most fun characters of the current Star Wars canon, and Alyssa Wong captures her voice well, but here she's surrounded by too many additions, none of whom particularly stand out, and the quest for the Rings seems equally generic – both characters and plot missing the dark humour and twisted originality which Kieron Gillen and Si Spurrier previously brought to this title. The plot is rushed, with a fight scene breaking out for little reason and encounters with an AT-AT and some giant robots being so brief as to make zero impact.

Marika Cresta's efficient art and Rachelle Rosenberg's bright colours are well suited to the breezy adventure tone of the story, though like with the script, we wish there were more ambition in the character and location designs. Nevertheless, this is early days for the new run, and Aphra's latest expedition could yet turn up some gold.

KIERON MOORE

★★★★★ 5

+ www.starburstmagazine.com +



STAR PIG

WRITER: DELILAH S. DAWSON
ARTIST: FRANCESCO GASTON
PUBLISHER: IDW
FORMAT: PAPERBACK
RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

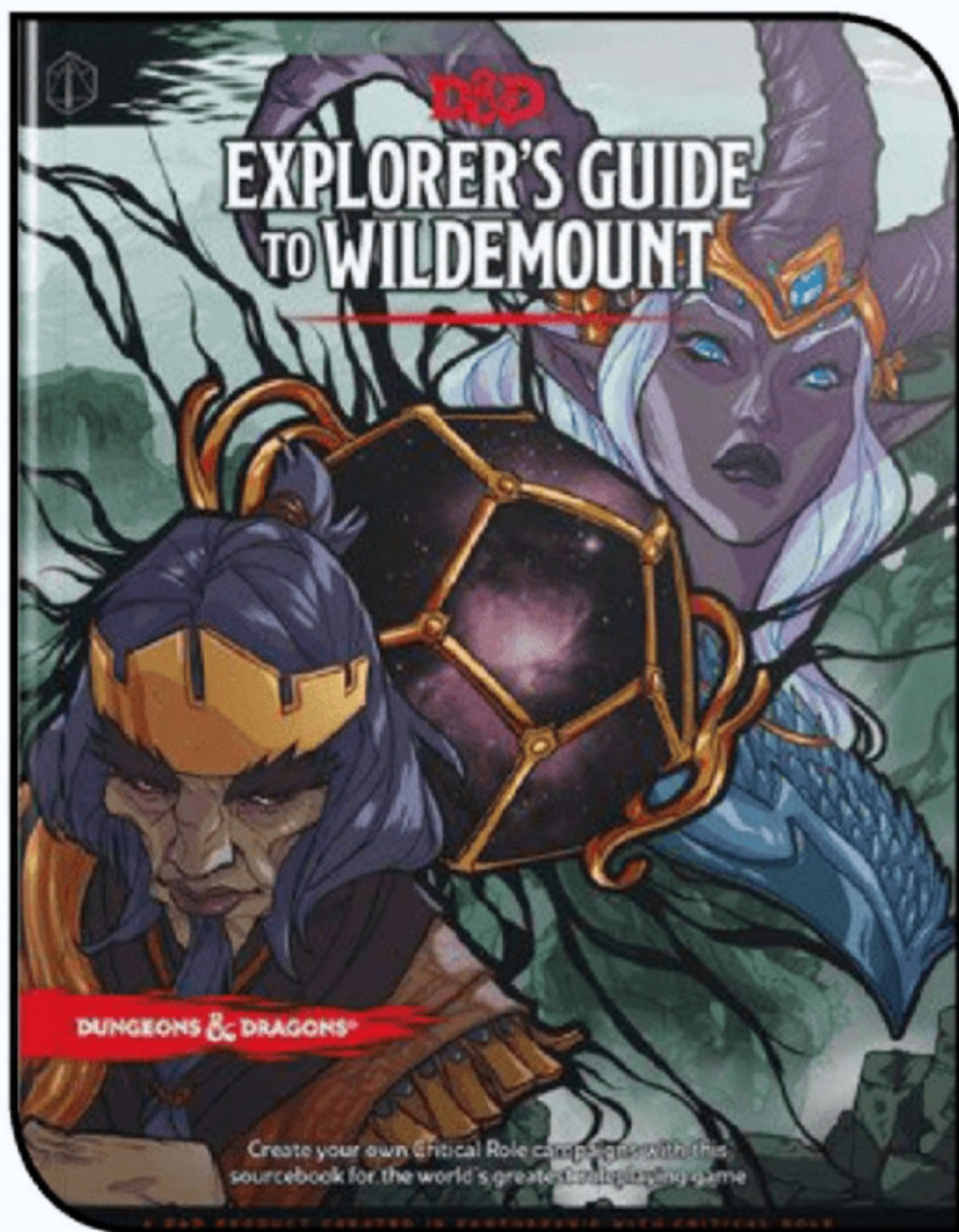
Whimsy is a rare thing in modern sci-fi comic books. The trend tends to be for serious heroes doing serious things, or everyman point-of-view types getting into all sorts of grim and dark trouble. As the title might suggest, Star Pig eschews this trend for a tale that is simply very, very silly. Our main character is a teenage girl called Vess Singh-Rodriguez. While on an exciting school trip to 'Space Camp', her space shuttle gets caught up in a tragic accident. Luckily, she's rescued by the titular Star Pig, a 'mega-tardigrade' who goes by the name of Theo Tardigrade. Fortunately for Vess, Theo is a super hardy sort of alien who's able to protect her from the vacuum of space. Unluckily for the pair of them, they then get scooped up by something that's not as cool. Star Pig is one of those stories where the main characters are constantly avoiding death, going from bad to worse every step of the way. The moments of respite are always going to lead to more trouble and so on. Vess is more of an adult's idea of what a teenager should be like, but that's okay as they're a 'sort of futuristic' character. All the various aliens speak English, of course, and everyone's heard of Earth's pop culture. This is a very silly sort of 'lost in space' drama and it's also very charming. Dawson is no stranger to sci-fi fantasy, as fans of her Star Wars books will cheerfully confirm. Star Pig is very much a different sort of beast. It's silly without being overtly comic and the main characters aren't heroes, they're just trying to get by, dodging one hazard to the next. This is not deep sci-fi, this is fantasy fun. In parts surreal, in other parts a little scary, Star Pig feels firmly aimed at both the young and young at heart.

ED FORTUNE

★★★★★ 8

ROLL FOR DAMAGE

ED FORTUNE
GUIDES YOU THROUGH
THE REALM OF
TABLE TOP GAMING



In a previous column, we (briefly) lamented the fact the Fantasy Flight Games had shut down its Roleplaying Game department. This confused the heck out of us, as FFG has paid a small fortune for the *Star Wars* license and its range of *Star Wars* RPGs comes close to rivalling the might *Dungeons & Dragons* in terms of popularity. It turns out that we sort of spoke too soon. Fantasy Flight is owned by gaming mega-corp Asmodee, and all of the RPG production duties have been moved to another company that Asmodee owns, namely Edge Studios. If the name sounds familiar, then you probably play RPGs in French or Spanish, as Edge mostly handled translations of English language games (including the likes of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Call of Cthulhu*).

Edge Studios will be handling all the games that FFG's table top gaming division used to deal with.

Edge is excellent at design and editing, so it's likely we'll see a nice bump in quality here. Most table top RPGs are designed by freelancers, so it's nice to know that the games will still be in development. However, given that some permanent staff have been let go in this reshuffle, it's too soon to tell if there's going to be any actual change in direction with the product line.

We hope not, as the various games, especially samurai action fantasy *Legend of the Five Rings* and *Star Wars: Force and Destiny*, have been rather good. Their core system *Genesys* is a lovely balance of crunchy rules and improv freeform gaming, being one of those rare games that switches from rules heavy 'structured play' to the more relaxed 'narrative' style effortlessly. Basically, you want your combat sequences to be measured and fair, but still with plenty of room for creativity and nonsense

Star Wars, of course, has a long standing association with table top roleplaying games. At one point in the '80s, it was the only source of 'new material' for fans of the movies, and when Lucasfilm came to re-launch itself as a growing franchise, it used the material from the game as a source of inspiration and creativity. Those days are long gone, but the relationship between the two is still strong. Both *The Mandalorian* and *Star Wars Rebels* are said to have been inspired by games of the *Star Wars* RPG in the past. (There have been multiple versions of the game, though this column will happily argue that the new books are the best thus far.)

In further table top gaming news, the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* turned up at the STARBURST's Secret Gaming Thunderdome. The setting is from the popular *Critical Role* webseries, an online show that has very talented actors/improv experts playing a game of *D&D*, hosted by celebrity Dungeon Master, Matt Mercer. It first sprang to life on YouTube Channel *Geek and Sundry* in 2015 and has been a bit of a cult smash ever since, doing a lot more for the hobby than *Stranger Things* ever did. *Wildemount* is the first official tome set in Mercer's bespoke world of Exandria.

We say official because back in 2017, Mercer wrote the *Tal'dorei Campaign Setting*, set in the same world and published by Green Ronin books. That book is still in

print and deals with a different continent. Comparing the two, though, you can easily see which one is the officially licensed product; *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* is just a more polished product with better plot hooks, nicer ideas and gorgeous art. To be honest, if you have to choose between the two, get the new official one, it's simply a better book.

It's a fully detailed explanation of the world featured in *Critical Role*, and it's also one that's very, very *D&D*. The whole thing slots in nicely with other *D&D* settings, so gods such as Tiamat and Vecna will be familiar to you. However, their legends and worshippers are different, so it's the right mix of similar and strange. There's enough mystery in the magic system to make it notable (though not quite as far out as *Eberron*). It really does feel like someone's modified *D&D* campaign, which is exactly what it is. Great for geeks looking for an off-the-shelf and 'fresh enough' setting, and as always, great for Dungeon Masters who like looting other sourcebooks for new ideas.

It really benefits from the Wizards of the Coast treatment - thus far, all of these affairs have been very well put together and excellent resources. It's worth saying that though is a supplement for the game from *Critical Role*, it's not a book designed to make your game look like *Critical Role*; you'd need to

Critical Role



Magic: The Gathering - Ikorla: Lair of the Behemoths



study acting and improv for that sort of thing.

Speaking of which, and on the subject of watching *Dungeons & Dragons* being played for fun, the utterly superb *Questing Time* is now available via the streaming service Twitch. *Questing Time* is a stage show that features world-class improv and stand-up comedians playing *D&D* and is far, far funnier than that sounds. Until recently, it's really just been a treat for people living in London, who could actually get tickets to

the show. To be honest, this show has sort of been a secret pleasure for RPG professionals and media types for a while now.

The Dungeon Master is Paul Foxcroft, who is a professional comedian who's been on the scene for well over a decade and is the sort of talent that other really talented people make a point of going to see. He's also one of the UK's best regarded teachers of improv comedy, which probably explains why its players tend to be also top notch comedians in their

own right. Or to put it another way: when it's on stage, *Questing Time* is a bargain because it's five brilliant comedians playing a game of *D&D* for a good long time and it's consistently funny and pleasurable to watch. And now it's more of a bargain because it's online! The new Twitch channel is a little raw around the edges (they're all new to the format), but the whole crew are blisteringly good at what they do. Our advice is to simply jump onto the most recent episode and enjoy the ride. It's also available via the official *Dungeons & Dragons* Twitch channel, as the lovely Wizards of the Coast people are fans of the show.

There are, of course, other shows out there, and better promoted ones at that, but this is a rare gem that most of you would have missed simply being in the wrong part of the world at the wrong time, which is a shame because it's a great show. Grab some popcorn and enjoy an excellent bit of theatre that also happens to be geeky as all get out, basically.

Of course, some of you may be missing your own games. Many of you should be into playing table top games online by now, but if not, don't forget that services such as *D&D Beyond*, *Roll20*, and *Fantasy Grounds* are all available and free at their basic levels. Personally, we've been using online dice rollers and *Discord* at the moment, but

your mileage may vary.

In other news, we're very excited to learn that Wizards of the Coast has teamed up with Toho Studios. *Magic: The Gathering - Ikorla: Lair of the Behemoths* looks to be exactly what it says on the tin - *Magic: The Gathering* but with *Godzilla* and chums turning up to cause all sorts of havoc. The set includes some thematically interesting mechanics that will make them rather scary if you can get the mana to summon them, of course. The art looks amazing and it's going to be as well balanced as all the other *Magic* cards on the market today. No sign as yet if this means we are going to get *Godzilla*-related content for *Dungeons & Dragons*, but we can only hope. The releases have been pushed back, of course, but it's something to look forward to.

Ed Fortune is currently working on the next episode of his *Star Wars* roleplaying game campaign. It's called *The Shadows of the Jedi* and you can listen to it on the *Force Majeure Actual Play Podcast*, which is currently being put together using *Discord*, USB microphones and pluck. He's also playing *Atomic Robo* using *FATE*, and he's finally painting his *Ork Goff* army. We always want to hear more about what you're playing. You can contact him via Twitter on @ed_fortune or via ed.fortune@starburstmagazine.com.





THE LATEST RELEASES
REVIEWED AND RATED

REVIEWS



FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

DEVELOPER & PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX • PLATFORM: PS4 • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

In 1997, the world was introduced to Final Fantasy VII, a title that changed the future of gaming, inspiring and enthralling a generation of players. 23 years later, the remake that fans have been waiting but never thought would come has finally been released - and it's set to change the world of gaming once again. Ladies and gentlemen, the Final Fantasy VII Remake is finally here.

Set in the futuristic city of Midgar, Cloud (an ex-SOLDIER) joins eco-terrorist group Avalanche to take down the mighty and tyrannical Shinra corporation and save the planet that is being bled dry of its energy. However, after accomplishing part of their goal, Avalanche meets Shinra head-on as the company fights back - all while Cloud battles with his own demons and, eventually, his new friends get swept up in the journey of a lifetime to save the world.

From the outset, one of the standout features of the game is its visuals - every single inch of Midgar is full of character and looks simply stunning. Over recent years, we have been able to see the talent of Square Enix with their projects Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children and, most recently on PS4, Final Fantasy XV,

so we all know that the team can create wonderfully vibrant worlds and amazing looking characters - but it's not until you see Midgar come to life that your childhood begins to flood back and the tears of joy stream down your face. Every corner of the map, every enemy design (including those ludicrous ones that fans will remember - we're looking at you, Hell House) and every character are all exactly how you remember them, yet upgraded for the 4K HD era and even better than before.

Speaking of better than before: the combat. Now, you may think that the iconic turn-based mechanic of the classic Final Fantasy titles cannot be bested (which is true in some cases, with the recent FFXIII and FFXIV having their teething problems when switching to a real-time battle system), however, in the case of FF7R, it seems that Square Enix has taken everything they've learned from recent titles that worked and fine-tuned it to make one of the smoothest and most satisfying battle systems we've ever seen. The ATB system allows users to hit basic attacks building up a gauge, which can then be used to unleash powerful melee attacks or spells, and is exhilarating to use - not only that,

but the ability to slow down time to plan your next attack evokes nostalgia to the classic system while also having the ability to hotkey moves for that free-flowing gameplay. Essentially, it's a beautiful fusion of old and new, allowing players of all ages and abilities to play, enjoy and feel thrilled by the game's crazy action and mind-blowingly epic battles. On top of that, the use of Materia - orbs of magic that allow the user to harness different spells and abilities - is back and is more intuitive than ever before. Levelling up your Materia and making sure you have the right spells equipped to the right person before a boss battle is essential to winning the fight, and is one of the great RPG aspects of the game along with levelling up your weapons to your own liking.

The world itself is much bigger and more alive than fans of the original will remember - this particular game only covers the Midgar portion of the story (which, to some, might seem like a copout or will make them feel shortchanged at a glance) but, believe us, this is worth the admission price. Midgar is full of places to explore, side quests and mini-games to complete, people to meet and stories to

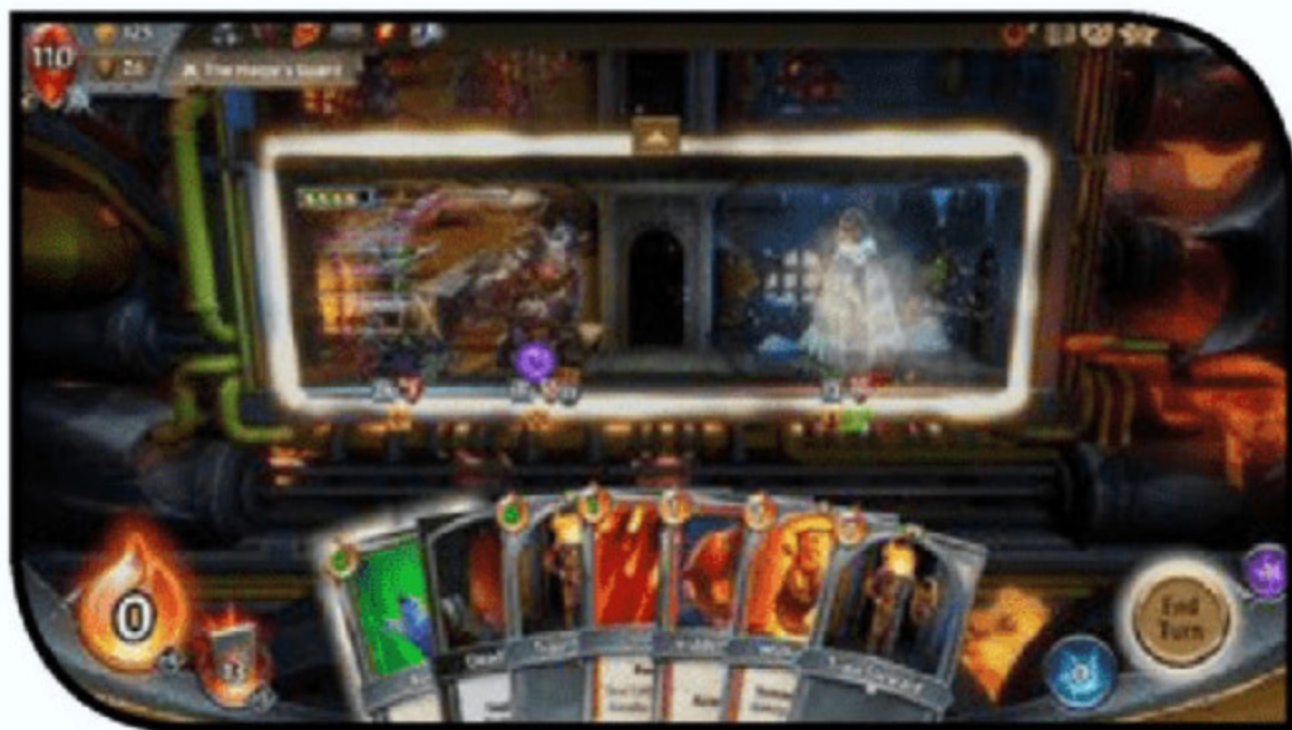
hear. The voice acting is another new component for the remake over the original and, although we fell in love with these characters 23 years ago and chose our own voices for them, the voice talent behind the remake is utterly exceptional. Cloud is as moody as we remember, Barret is full of fire and Tifa and Aerith are powerful and compassionate - absolutely stellar work from all involved that allows everyone to connect with the characters and their story.

With stunning visuals, groundbreakingly smooth and inspired battle gameplay along with outstanding character work, one other component is the icing on the cake - the music. One of the most memorable elements of the original was legendary composer Nobuo Uematsu's iconic score, from the Opening Bombing Mission to Aerith's Theme and every battle theme in-between, we honestly thought that it couldn't be beaten - but we were wrong. FF7R's soundtrack takes these classic tunes and amplifies them by 100. Every single battle feels big, even if you're only fighting rats in the sewer, and that's down to the music. For fans of the original, these songs will bring memories flooding back and you will have goosebumps surging up your arms - simply gorgeous.

Final Fantasy VII Remake is a masterpiece - an absolute triumph and a perfect reimagining of a beloved classic. A welcome return for longtime fans to a world they love realised in much larger fashion, yet also incredibly embracing for new fans that are welcomed in with open arms with larger than life characters, epic battles, and slick gameplay accessible to all. Even though this is just a small portion of the Final Fantasy VII story and lore, the fact that the game gives players an experience that will last at least 40 hours or more means that this title stands on its own two feet as an epic RPG - and the exciting thing is, there's still more to come in the next instalment!

JAMES PERKINS

+++++10



MONSTER TRAIN

DEVELOPER: SHINY SHOE • PUBLISHER: GOOD SHEPHERD ENTERTAINMENT • PLATFORM: PC • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Similar to last year's sleeper hit Slay the Spire, Monster Train is a roguelike deck-building game. Where the two games differ, however, is that here you're the bad guys on the defence.

The story goes that Hell has frozen over and you must protect the last burning pyre from Heaven's forces and restore the inferno. Your train, consisting of four floors, moves through different areas, being bombarded by enemy visitors. Enemies usually come in on the ground

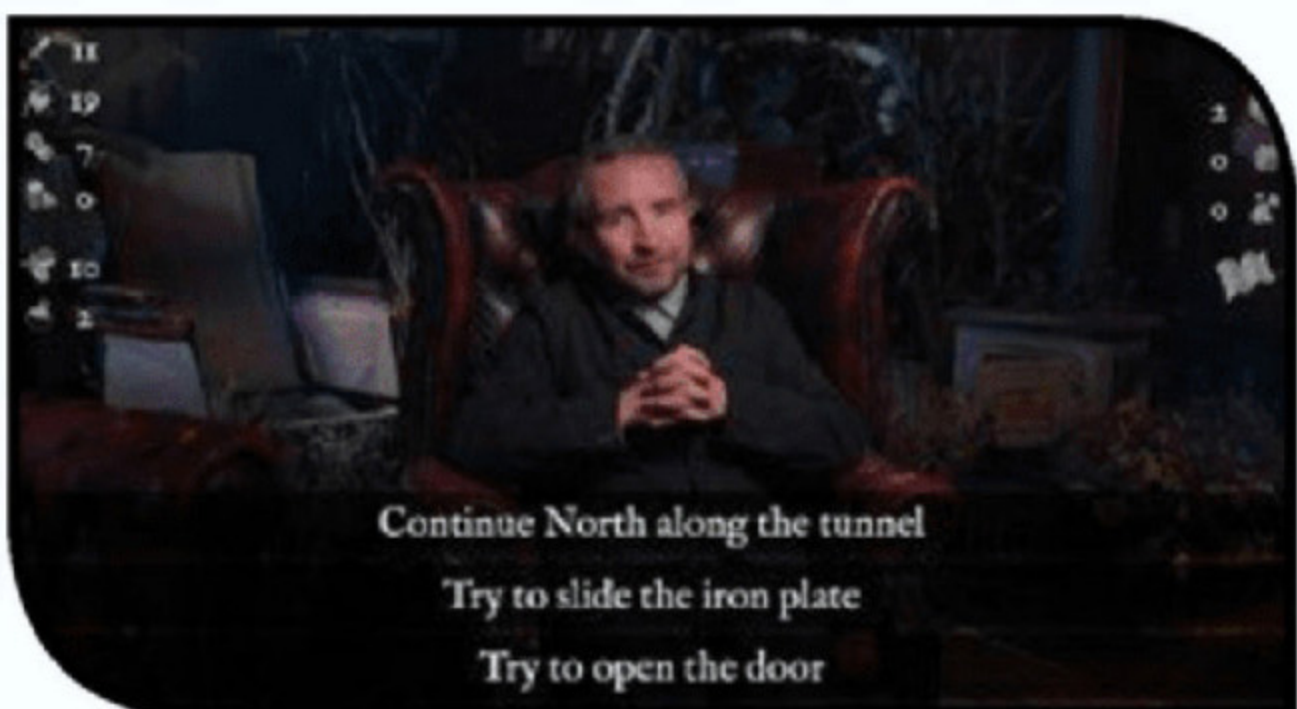
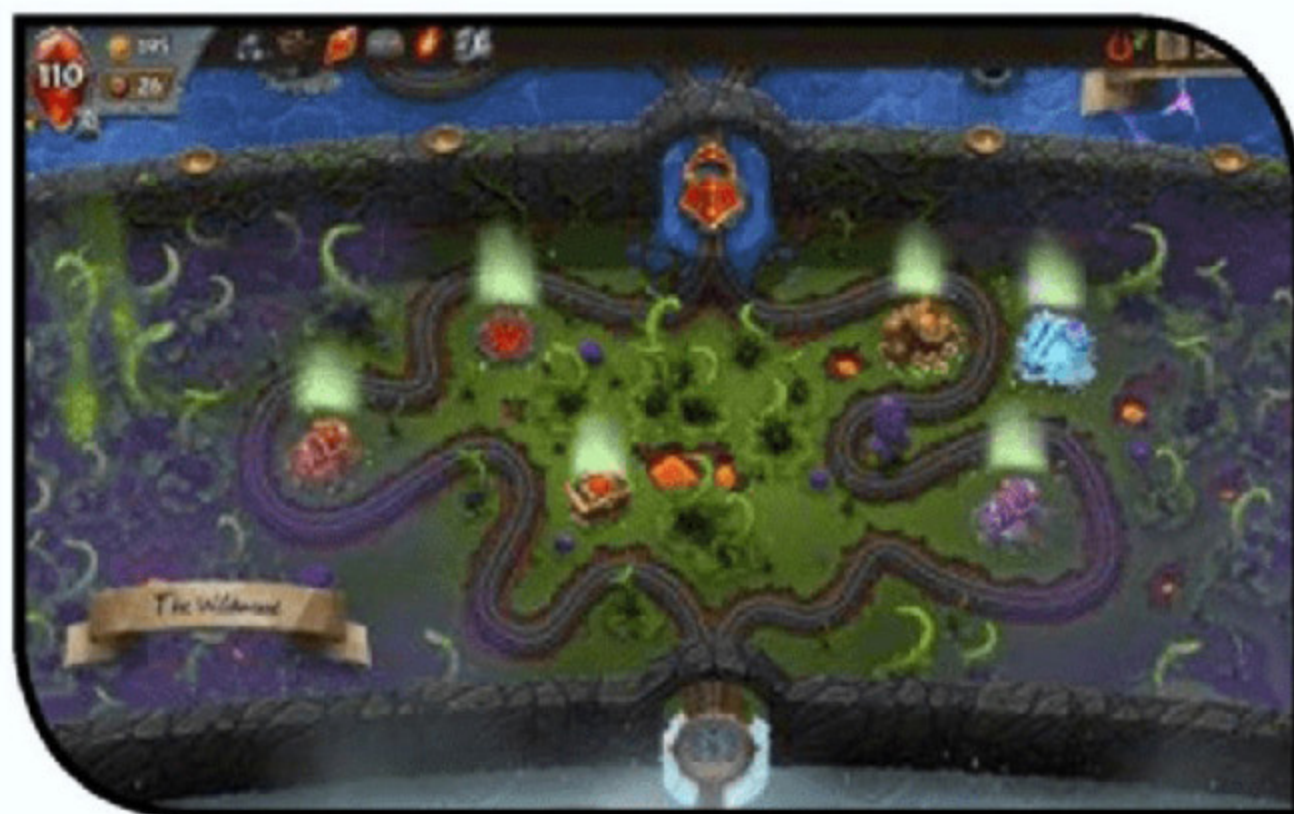
floor and then attack and defend; if they survive, they move up to the next floor. Your cards consist of defenders and spells, with each defender having a capacity value, only allowing you to put a couple of defenders on each floor. At the fourth floor, they'll battle your powerful pyre and, when that dies, it's game over. As you progress, you'll gain new cards, upgrade existing ones and gain artefacts that add special abilities. As with all roguelikes, once you lose, all your deck is gone and you start from the beginning.

The game takes a while to get going, and having to repeat early levels can be a bit of a grind due to how long they take and how straightforward it starts out. Once you get a few new cards and upgrades, though, things slowly become a bit more interesting and tactical. There are over 200 different cards altogether and, although the artwork on them isn't anything special, the characters themselves look decent, and they utilise a wide range of different mechanics that anyone who's played collectible card games will be familiar with.

Other than the standard single player mode, there's also an online multiplayer mode where you battle other players, a daily challenge with online leaderboard, and a mode that allows you to create your own challenge for others. It's hard not to compare Monster Train with Slay the Spire, as they're very similar set ups, but this too is a fun game that's worth checking out.

STEPHEN J BOOTHROYD

+++++++ 8



DEATHTRAP DUNGEON: THE INTERACTIVE VIDEO ADVENTURE

DEVELOPER & PUBLISHER: BRANCHING NARRATIVE • PLATFORM: ANDROID, IOS, PC (REVIEWED) • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Video game adaptations of those 1980s 'choose your own adventure' books have rarely turned out well. Over the years, several developers have tried to recreate the thrill of these forgotten relics of a bygone age, but very few have succeeded in capturing the curious inquisitiveness and magical wonderment that actually reading a book, making decisions, turning the pages and allowing your imagination to run wild can provide. Games Workshop co-founder and prolific fantasy gamebook author Ian Livingstone is responsible for

some of the finest roleplaying titles of the '80s, with his Fighting Fantasy series sitting at the top of the list in terms of critical reception and longevity. Newcomers Branching Narrative recently released their debut game - an adaptation of 1984's Deathtrap Dungeon, the most popular and well-known entry in the Fighting Fantasy series - but can it live up to expectations set by its source material?

Part-story, part-game, Deathtrap Dungeon: The Interactive Video Adventure stars British actor Eddie Marsan (V For Vendetta, The

World's End and Deadpool 2, among other genre favourites) who narrates the story and offers hints to the player. Marsan reads passages from the book with an understated but friendly tone from the safety of an old leather armchair. When the time comes for decisions to be made, it's a simple case of clicking your preferred option on-screen. Combat outcomes are based around your character's health, stamina, and luck points, with success or failure determined by in-game dice rolls. Your stats are displayed around the screen so everything's easy to keep track of, and rules of the more intricate battles are thoroughly explained so you never feel lost

or overwhelmed.

Everything works well for the most part, and some nice artwork pops up here and there to illustrate your surroundings (usually matching exactly with what your imagination had already put together). We can't help but wonder if adopting a slightly more over the top persona for Marsan's narrator might have upped the ante in the entertainment stakes a little but, other than that, Deathtrap Dungeon: The Interactive Video Adventure is a fine update, and certainly a novel way to experience a true genre classic.

CHRIS JACKSON

+++++++ 7





MAGIC: THE GATHERING COMMANDER RUTHLESS REGIMENT

PUBLISHER: MAGIC THE GATHERING • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Commander is easily the most accessible way to play Magic: The Gathering in. Not only does it allow for up to six players (rather than the traditional two-player duel format), it's also quite story lead as it relies on a Legendary Creature card to serve as the deck's leader, the titular Commander. It's also tricky to pull off, as you need a

lot of cards and there can't be duplicates. Ruthless Regiment is a pre-built deck for playing the Commander version of Magic, and it's a rather good one.

Ruthless Regiment is a Mardu Deck (Red, White, and Black). The theme is humans, mostly soldiers, who will stop at nothing to win their war. The deck is designed to get as many

soldiers and leader types into play as possible. The deck also then let's you sacrifice your own men for tactical advantage, and then bring those troops back from the dead to continue to attack other opponents.

This is a 'stack them high, knock them down, and then knock them out'-style deck. Your first few turns are going to be defensive ones, filling the table with disposable minions in order to ward off probing attacks. You're also going to be quite weak at the start; a lot of the land cards come out tapped - this means that you'll be low on fuel to power spells and summon creatures early on. However, they are worth it. Cards such as Bojuka Bog's give you the power to exile graveyarded cards, which will foil other black decks. For a RWB deck, there's a lot of disruption built into the deck's design, which means you'll be annoying various opponents early on. Which is always fun to do in these games.

You're going to be gently increasing power as the game progresses, cards such as Thalia's Lieutenant, Thraben

Doomsayer, and Dearly Departed will turn humble soldiers into real threats (either through leadership or supernatural shenanigans). Titan Hunter and Magus of the Disk will disrupt your opponents and slowly bleed them dry for resources, and if things look grim, Disciple of Bolas, Ambitions Cost, and similar cards let you shift tactics and focus. The theme of grim sacrifice works very well; for example, we have a character called Trynn, Champion of Freedom, who pairs beautifully with Silvar, Devourer of the Free, to build the sort of attack that's both epic and tragic in concept and execution.

Ruthless Regiment is also crammed with gorgeous art and the sort of storytelling unique to these types of card games. It's a strongly-themed deck that will entertain most Magic players one way or another. The list is also fun to tinker with as the idea behind the deck is very accessible. A great addition to a great format.

ED FORTUNE

+++++++ 8



THE PERSISTENCE

DEVELOPER & PUBLISHER: FIRESprite • PLATFORM: PC, PS4, SWITCH, XBOX ONE • RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Originally released in 2018 as a PSVR exclusive, The Persistence earned countless plaudits thanks to its brutally immersive take on survival horror. Non-VR owners are now able to experience possibly the greatest sci-fi rogue-lite ever made with this regular flat-screen edition on PC and consoles – and PSVR owners can also go flat via a free update and, conversely, the PC version can be played in VR!

Set in the year 2521, players attempt to repair a stranded space station and bring it back to

earth from the grip of a black hole, while dealing with murderous crew members who have been turned into a variety of monstrous aberrations. Your mission will take you through several different areas of the ship, completing objectives, scavenging the environment for upgrade materials and, of course, fighting (or fleeing from) all manner of savage foes.

Each time you start a new game, the ship's layout changes so you're never quite sure what you'll find at any given moment.

You always have access to a map to guide your path, but the constant creaking of the ship, clanking of its pipes, and strange scuttling noises from behind the walls mean you're constantly on edge, and that's before we even think about the half-headed Listeners, relentless Bloodhounds, gigantic Berserkers, and other nasties that stand in your way.

Luckily, The Persistence gives players a huge amount of toys to mess around with, from futuristic weaponry and super-powered modifications to environmental hazards that can be turned to your advantage. Everything needs to be earned and unlocked using

credits, tokens, and enemy DNA cells, which gives the perfect reason to spend time exploring the darkest and most terrifying recesses of the ship.

With some excellent presentation, the most user-friendly menus we've seen in years, tight controls and truly addictive gameplay, The Persistence is absolutely a must-buy for any rogue-lite sci-fi horror fan. It runs flawlessly on the Switch too, in case you were wondering!

CHRIS JACKSON

+++++++ 9





STREETS OF RAGE 4

DEVELOPER: DOTEMU, LIZARDCUBE, GUARD CRUSH GAMES • PUBLISHER: DOTEMU • PLATFORM: PC, PS4, SWITCH, XBOX ONE (REVIEWED) RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

If you were a gamer during the early '90s, chances are you came across the Streets of Rage franchise. Completely revitalising the beat 'em up genre and further raising the profile of Sega's 16-bit Megadrive/Genesis console, the SOR trilogy was a huge mainstream success and undoubtedly one of the most recognisable video game series of the era. Now, after much fan demand and an almost 26-year wait, the franchise is finally getting a new iteration on modern consoles in the form of Streets of Rage 4!

Development was split between Lizardcube and Guard Crush Games (with Dotemu handling publishing duties) after Lizardcube had initially approached Sega with the idea. The combination of Lizardcube and Dotemu had proved to be a potent mix after their highly praised remake of Wonder Boy 3 (which we can't recommend enough!), so Sega were keen to greenlight the project and, with the addition of a modified version of Guard Crush Games' Streets Of Fury engine, SOR4 was born.

Gameplay doesn't deviate

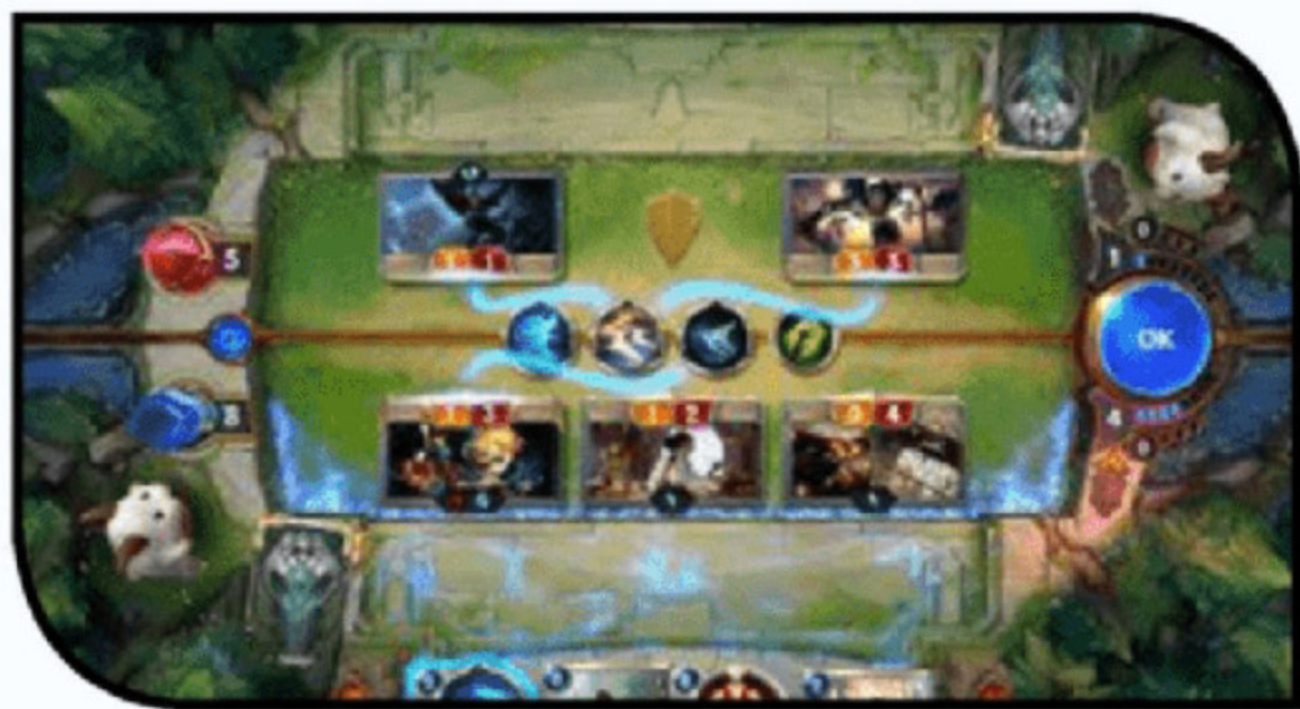
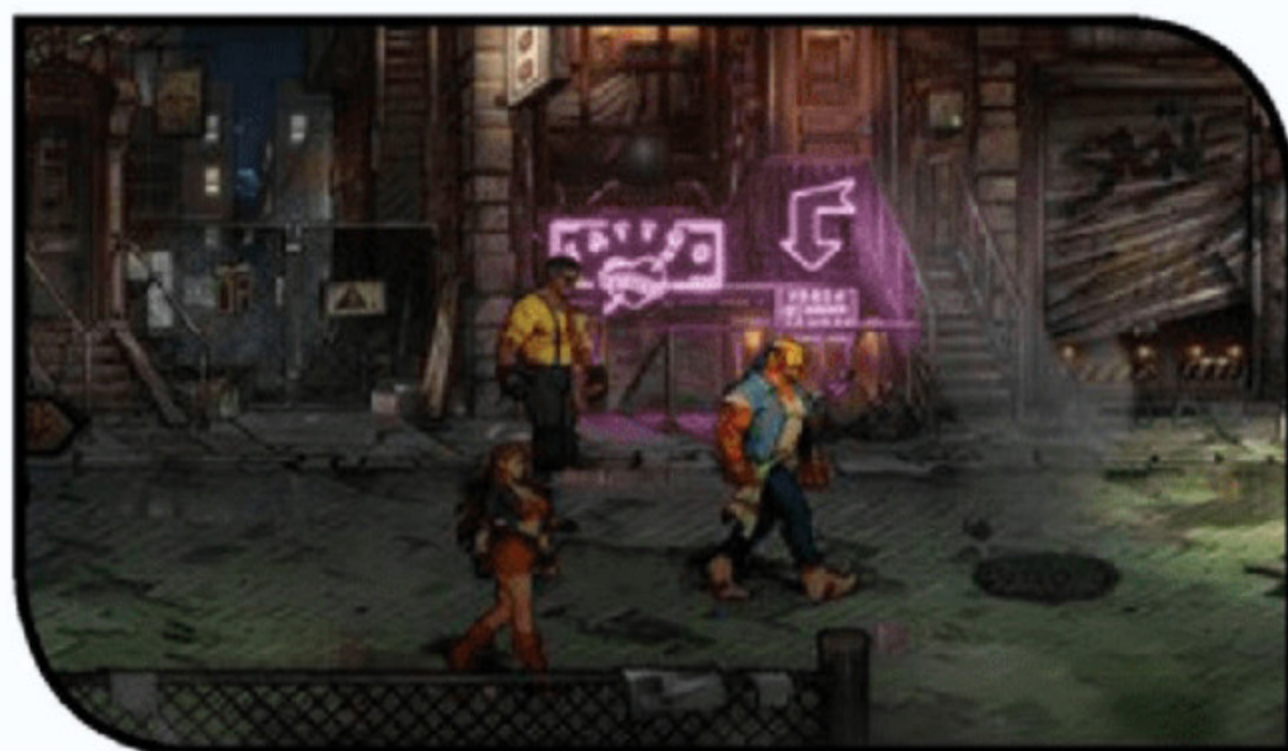
too far from the original formula, but with a few welcome additions that help bring the game into the modern era. You're still playing a traditional, belt scrolling, arcade button-masher, but there are far more combos, special moves, hidden areas, weapons, and general tactics to deploy. For the first time in a SOR title, players can now enjoy simultaneous four-player multiplayer co-op action, both locally or online. This is where the lion's share of your enjoyment is going to come from. Things get pretty frantic in multiplayer and stringing together chains of combos and joint attacks is extremely satisfying. Back is the health-depleting special move from almost all beat 'em ups, but now you have the opportunity to regain the health lost from performing

the move by executing a perfectly timed combo.

Presentation is top notch right across the board, from the menus, to the soundtrack, to the graphical style. The music, in particular, really captures the vibe of the original (which is none too surprising given that Yuzo Koshiro was one of the composers), but the whole package really is what SOR fans have been clamouring for. There's also a huge amount of replayability with such a vast amount of things to unlock and so many things to customise. SOR4 is a beat 'em up fan's dream.

SEAN ONLY

+++++++ 8



LEGENDS OF RUNETERRA

DEVELOPER: RIOT GAMES • PLATFORM: PC, IOS, ANDROID RELEASE DATE: OUT NOW

Riot Games' new digital collectable card game, set in the League of Legends universe, has left beta after three months and - spoiler alert - it's awesome.

If you're new to the genre, basically you build a deck and use it to block and attack your opponent. The player vs player game modes consist of ranked, unranked, and expeditions, which involves drafting together a deck over 15 rounds and attempting to win seven matches for big rewards. You

can also have matches against the AI as well as do 'challenges' that act as the tutorials. These are well designed and make the game easy enough to get started. However, like any good card game, it'll take a while before you learn the WTF moments of seeing a card you've never come across kill you in the blink of an eye and work out strategies.

The cards are split into seven different regions, with each region having 125 different

cards. You can use up to two different regions to build your deck of 40 cards. Cards are split into units and spells. Each card has a mana cost and you earn a mana equal to what round it is. The aim of the game is to do 20 damage to opponents Nexus, before they deal it to yours.

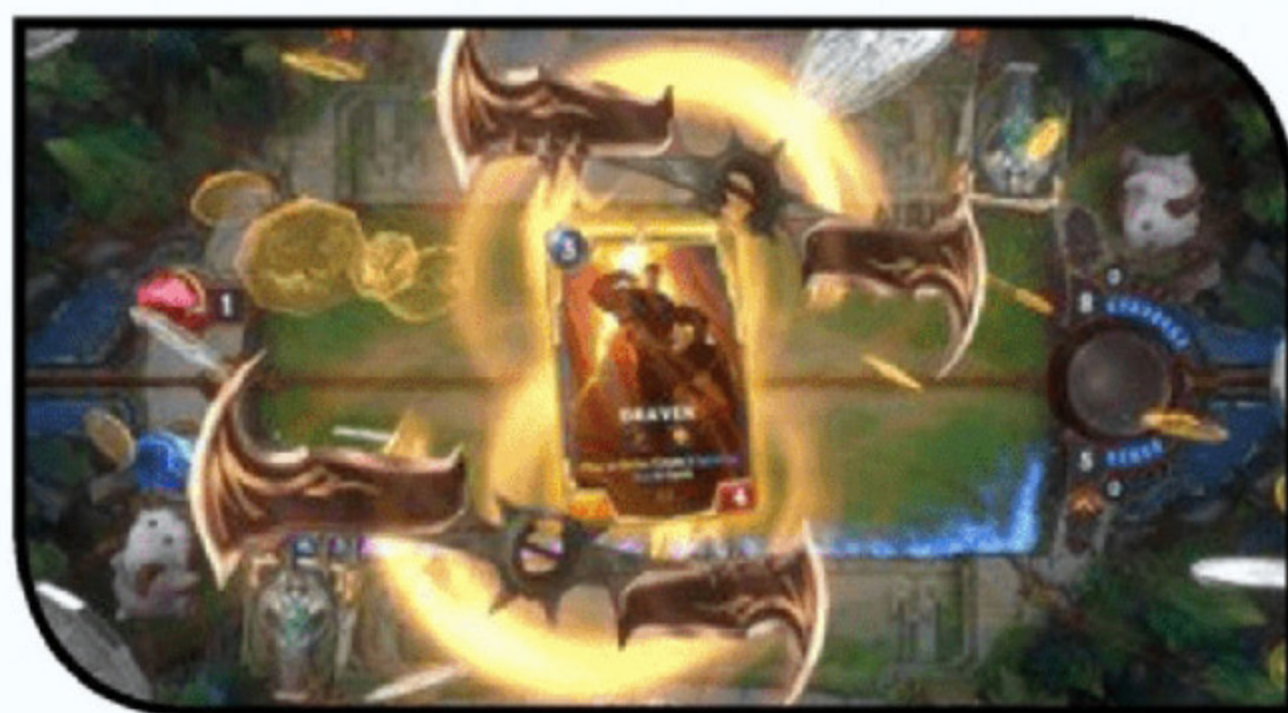
The game is very generous for a free-to-play game. You can, and mostly like will, happily play this game without spending a penny. New cards can be bought with real money, but you also unlock them as you play and learn the game. You're able to spend money on cosmetics as well, which is likely where it will make most of its profit.

The game works beautifully on mobile and you're able to transition between PC, phone or tablet mid-game. The whole package is well presented, with detailed artwork on all the cards, small animations, and a well-designed menu system making deck building a doddle.

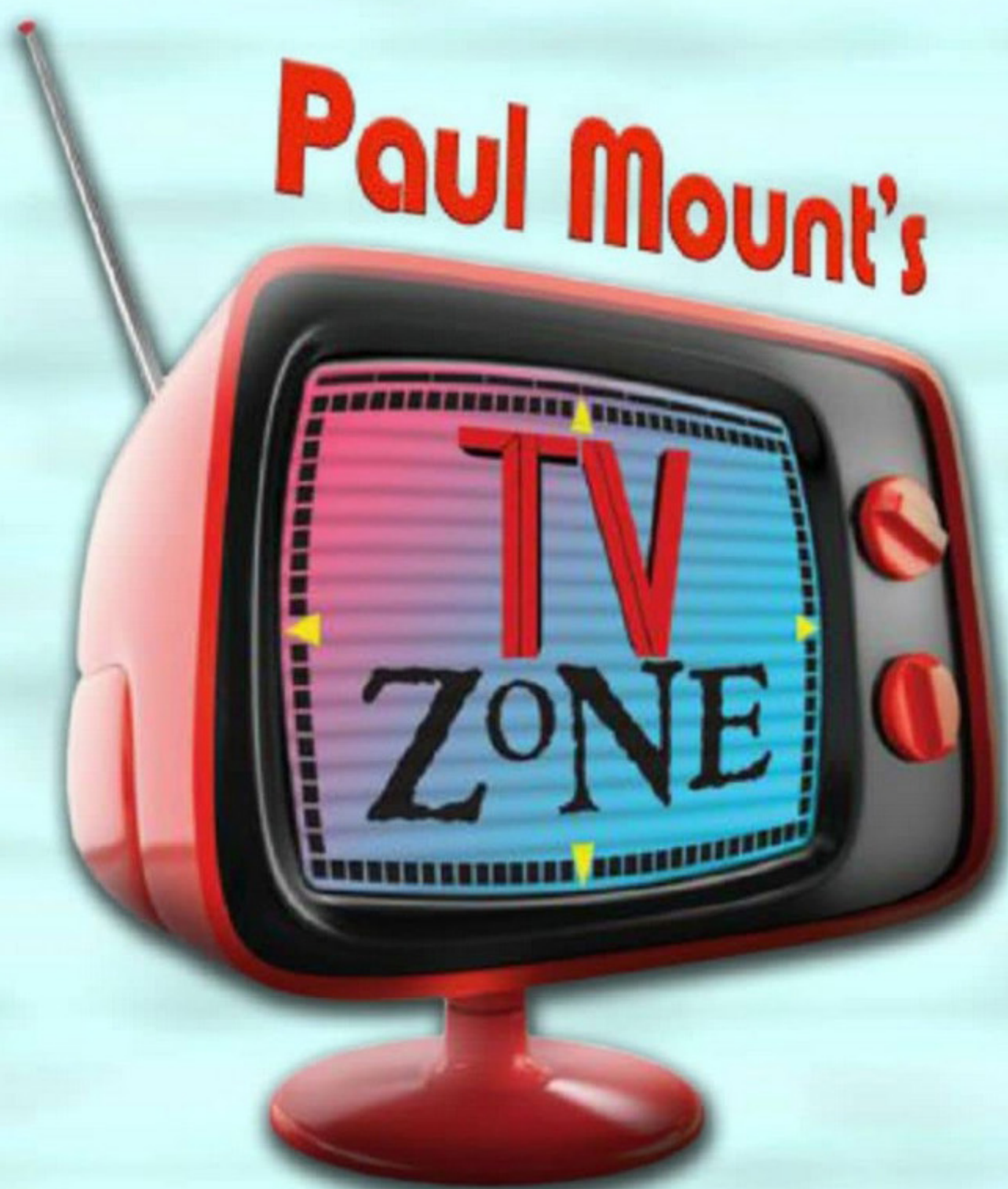
Say goodbye to your free time as this sets a new standard for online trading card games and will consume you. Whether you're a veteran or new to genre, don't sleep on it.

STEPHEN J BOOTHROYD

+++++++10



Paul Mount's



TV ZONE's whistle-stop catch-up voyages into deep space with **THE MANDALORIAN**, **STAR TREK: PICARD**, **VAGRANT QUEEN**, and **RED DWARF**, before coming down to Earth with **DEVs**, **INTO THE NIGHT**, and **EMERGENCE...**

Having found myself with an uncharacteristic amount of free time over the past few weeks, it's not unreasonable to expect that I might have taken advantage of my novel new circumstances to finally hunker down and work my way through all those box sets I've been telling myself I'd get around to one day. Time at last to really dig into **Game of Thrones**, having previously bailed out halfway through Season 3 with still no real idea who was who and slightly concerned that if there's a Westeros surely there should be an Easteros and even, for that matter, a Northeros and a Southeros. Maybe a rewatch of **Breaking Bad** is long overdue? Perhaps I should give **Star Trek: Discovery** another look or – God help me – it appears that every episode of long-running US supernatural soap **Dark Shadows** has found its way to Amazon Prime and I've always meant to have a little look at that.. Perhaps I need to rewatch the **Star Wars** movies to see if I can finally, decades later, really see what all the fuss is about! Needless to say, the DVDs and Blu-rays are still gathering dust on my shelves.

So no, I did none of these things, nor several others including recommendations like **Mindhunter**, **Hannibal**, **Supernatural** (all sixty-three seasons? maybe *not*..) that people, some of whose opinions I have been known to give the time of day – have told me I *really should watch*. But you know how it is; we're spoiled for choice these days and faced with quite literally an entire world of entertainment at the flick of a switch/press of a button, making the actual *decision* what to actually watch induce absolute terror and mild paralysis even when we appear to have all the time in the world and nowhere to go. So I spent a lot of time reading (temporarily eschewing my predilection for end-of-the-world or post-apocalyptic fiction because living it is a lot less fun than reading about it), and craving the simple pleasures of sitting in a coffee shop or going to the cinema (remember that?).

I have, of course, been watching the old box – this would be a rum old column if I hadn't been. As the world began to shut down I was already knee-deep in the likes of **Star Trek: Picard** and **The Mandalorian**, shows I was keen to watch because of my arms-length connection to their respective franchises. I can do the original **Star Trek** series and the J.J. Abrams films but much of the rest of it – men and women in tight space uniforms shouting at each other in spaceships season after season – leaves me as cold as the vacuum of space itself. Similarly, I can watch a **Star Wars** film and enjoy a simplistic space adventure romp without getting my lightsabers in a twist about how **The Last Jedi** (perfectly fine

actually) ruined my childhood, left me destitute, and made my cut off my cat's tail. I actually went into **The Mandalorian** not even being entirely sure what a Mandalorian was. [Are you quite sure you're working for the right magazine? – Ed]

I wanted to like **Star Trek: Picard** (Amazon Prime Video), I really did. Everyone loves Patrick Stewart, of course, and I am quite aware of the reverence with which he is held amongst **Star Trek** alumni. I quite enjoyed the first few episodes of the series that reintroduced Picard, now a sprightly ninety-something living in retirement in a French vineyard. I enjoyed the lavish, gorgeous visuals, the intelligent scripting and the intrigue that powered the series – the mystery of the cloned daughters of Picard's old **Next Generation**-era android chum Data – and I didn't initially feel excluded from the story due to the gaping gaps in my **Trek** lore. But after a promising start the show's pace became sluggish and, inevitably, it eventually morphed into yet another **Star Trek** series with Picard gathering together a new crew to pilot a handy new ship that takes them into space as he becomes determined to carry out one final unorthodox mission in an attempt to put right former wrongs. Before long, **Picard** was awash with Borg cubes and someone called Seven-of-Nine (Jeri Ryan), and my general unfamiliarity with/lack of interest in all this fan-pleasing backstory ultimately detached me from both the series and its leading man. I also couldn't shake off the nagging feeling that maybe Patrick Stewart seems a little too frail for this sort of stuff now – but maybe that's just a great actor playing an older man who finds himself out of time – in every sense of the term. I appreciate that **Star Trek: Picard** has been a triumph but regret that it didn't float my boat as much as I might have hoped it would.

The Mandalorian (Disney+) was a different kettle of fish though. Despite having only the broadest knowledge of the intricacies of the **Star Wars** universe, this thrilling, imaginative eight-episode series didn't feel at all exclusionary. All I needed to know was that the titular Mandalorian (Din Djarin, an un-star-making role played by Pedro Pascal with a bin over his head the whole time) is a bounty hunter who roams the galaxy making a crust where and when he can, who finds himself entrusted to look after a very special living cargo. Genre commentators more versed



STAR TREK: PICARD



THE MANDALORIAN

in this stuff than me have already pointed out (and relished) the show's unashamed credentials as a space Western, with Djarin cruising the galaxy far, far away indulging in shoot-outs and brawls, all to the backdrop of a gorgeously atmospheric Morricone-inspired score from Ludwig Göransson. Great stuff, massively entertaining, and I'm pleased to hear that a second series, due in October, wrapped production shortly before... well, you know.

There were space antics of a distinctly more lowbrow fashion to be found in Syfy's **Vagrant Queen** (already shunted into a graveyard slot over in the States after just a handful of episodes, which suggests that its day are numbered). This show has a peculiar **Blake's 7** vibe in its story of disenfranchised former queen Elida (Adriyan Rae) and her ragtag crew aboard their spaceship pursued by the boo-hiss baddy Commander Lazaro (Paul du Toit) as she discovers that her mother, long since assumed dead, is still alive and held in captivity. **Vagrant Queen**, based on a Vault comic book, is cheap, slightly sleazy, and ramshackle stuff but it's not without its charms if you're looking for something that doesn't take itself too seriously. The production design is a bit threadbare but there are a few decent visuals and the show's tongue-in-cheek tone becomes quite apparent when, in the second episode, Elida and her gang are captured on a hostile cannibal planet and forced to compete in a duel to save their own lives. However, this is a karaoke duel where the victor is whoever gives the best performance of Starship's *Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now*. It's that kind of show and you'll either be drawn in by its shamelessly third-rate charms or appalled by its tongue-in-cheek sloppiness.

The boys from the Dwarf were back in the much-anticipated **Red Dwarf** feature-length special **The Promised Land**. In an upside-down world it was quite refreshing to see that some things – and **Red Dwarf** in particular – absolutely refuse to change. This latest knockabout romp from Lister, Rimmer, Kryten, and Cat dipped into the show's own mythology and delivered ninety minutes of fairly standard **Dwarf**, the familiar mix of jokes that don't quite

work, jokes that are laugh-out loud funny, jokes that are funny despite being desperately derivative, and a nice bit of slapstick. Filmed on video in front of 'a live studio audience', **Red Dwarf** looks positively prehistoric compared to the slicker globe-trotting fare we're used to, but the show now occupies its own comfortable little place in the scheme of things; entirely unlikely to win over a new audience but giving some solace to its ageing aficionados who will watch it even as they complain that "it's *nothing like as good as it used to be*." Of course, it isn't, but it's good enough and for **Red Dwarf** that will do nicely.

Back on Earth (my preferred stamping ground for genre TV, if I'm honest) I found myself absorbed by a couple of shows that might, under more normal circumstances, have tried my patience a little. The Amazon Prime anthology show **Tales from the Loop** was a hell of a slog and yet strangely captivating (read my thoughts on it elsewhere in this issue) and

I became engrossed by Alex Garland's **Devs** (BBC 2) across its eight-episode run. This was Garland tipping his toe back into the AI/computer simulation world of 2014's stately and unnerving **Ex_Machina**. Sonoya Mizuno plays Lily, a software engineer who investigates the death of her boyfriend on his first day working for 'Devs', a top secret division of tech company Amaya run by the mysterious and charismatic Forest (Nick Offerman). Despite some pacing issues, **Devs** was an enthralling and entirely unique viewing experience, stunningly directed by Garland who delivered at least one jaw-droppingly well-released sequence in every episode; a vertiginous 'don't jump!' discussion on a high ledge in Episode Three, an artfully-staged freeway car crash in Episode Four, and the stunning scene in Episode Five that does so much to explain why Forest is so passionate about his 'Devs' project. **Devs** is proper, mature, thoughtful sci-fi, dealing with issues such as determinism and



RED DWARF: THE PROMISED LAND



DEVS

the nature of free will alongside genre staples such as time travel (in an oblique sense), virtual reality, and artificial intelligence in a run of delicious, challenging, puzzle-box episodes. Not to be missed if you fancy something way left of centre, **Devs** is sure to become one of the TV highlights of the year.

I'm also currently enjoying ABC's **Emergence** (Fox UK), an engrossing mainstream genre thriller that looked at first as if had nothing more to offer than yet *another* story about a creepy weird little kid with strange powers and a mysterious backstory who confounds everyone around her even as mysterious forces are closing in to recapture her and, presumably, carry out more fiendish experiments upon her. And, in fact, **Emergence** is exactly that, yet it manages to stand above and apart from many of its ilk – they're crawling all over Netflix – thanks to clever scripting that keeps the story pumping along, delivering enough real excitement and intrigue in the first couple of episodes to convince us that the investment in the series and its characters might actually be worthwhile. **Fargo** Season 1 standout Allison Tolman plays Jo Evans, newly-divorced police chief at Long Island's Peconic Bay who takes in a young child found at the sight of a mysterious plane crash. Predictably enough, the girl has no idea who she is or where she came from but she soon starts to exhibit peculiar talents and Jo finds herself embroiled in – wait for it – a conspiracy stretching back years as she finds out the truth about the girl's past and her link to a cryptic symbol that keeps turning up in the strangest places.

I'm aware that **Emergence** sounds absolutely like safe, cookie cutter mainstream genre TV but that's what I found so interesting about it. It's not trying to reinvent the wheel, it's not trying to be ground-breaking, but it is a slick, well-scripted piece of US Network television weird enough to attract the attention of a genre crowd but with enough recognisable Police procedural down-to-earth elements

to draw in an audience who might typically swerve anything even remotely fantastical. It also helps that Tolman is a terrific, charismatic everywoman lead, determined to protect her new young charge even as she is drawn deeper into a world she doesn't understand and is secretly and understandably incredibly wary of.

Over on Netflix, I found myself drawn, against my better instincts in the recent climate, to **Into the Night**, a Belgian apocalyptic series based on the 2015 novel **The Old Axolotl** by Jacek Dukaj. A motley group of passengers aboard a red-eye flight to Moscow find their plane apparently hijacked by a desperate NATO officer who is aware of an imminent apocalyptic event – something's gone wrong with the sun and its rays are causing people to drop dead where they stand – and he orders the pilot to keep the plane airborne and flying away from the sun as it rises around the world. The

fractured crew and passengers face a race against time to reach an underground military bunker in Bulgaria which offers one chance of salvation, potentially offering solace from whatever is killing the planet's organic life. **Into the Night's** six episodes zip along, packed with incident and action, and plenty of time is spent developing the core characters (there are a few brief **Lost**-style flashbacks to their earlier lives) and the 'ticking clock' plot device gives the show a real edge-of-the-seat sense of urgency. Inevitably, the show ends on a cliffhanger so we can expect a Season 2 presumably when we're well away from our own current mini-apocalypse. Stay safe! ✦

Check out the TV Zone Plus Podcast on Apple Podcasts or drop me an email: TVZonePlus@mail.com.



EMERGENCE



ACROSS THE WORLD

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it's only a movie

A Column by **ANDREW POLLARD**

It's only a virus.

That's been the mantra of some throughout these most strange and testing of times, with a foolish arrogance often accompanying those words. Here we are, though, several months removed from COVID-19 first rearing its head, and the world is at a vastly different place to when we last put a print magazine together. In those most testing of months, loved ones have been lost, mental health struggles have been immeasurably increased, personal and professional finances have been ravaged, and we've all gotten sick of staring at our own proverbial four walls. As such, it's a little bit strange to be tasked with penning a light-hearted column about certain recent goings-on within the film industry - particularly when said industry has been largely brought to a halt - but still, here's hoping that these oft-rambling words that lie ahead of you will at least be able to take your mind off real-world problems for at least a few minutes.

Firstly, I should probably introduce myself. With Editor Mike Royce having only a few more issues before passing the **It's Only a Movie** torch (see **STARBURST #471**, true believers!), the honour of tackling this iconic staple of our fine publication has fallen to myself, Andrew Pollard. I've been a part of the **STARBURST** family for seven years now, with my official capacity being the Online Editor and one of our Lead Writers. You might also recognise me as the hairy fella who ambled around on the stage during 2019's **STARBURST International Film Festival**. The fact that the Big Boss Man (not to be confused with the beloved grappler of yesteryear) has trusted me with a column created by the legendary John Brosnan and then continued on by Mike himself, has not been lost on me. When I say it's a pleasure and a privilege to be trusted with this duty, I truly mean it. But enough waffling about myself and a global crisis - for you're here for some actual movie gubbins!

As mentioned, it's been a strange old time for the entertainment business, period, during these past few months. Many a movie has seen its release date pushed back to a time when people will hopefully be able to venture out to the cinema, while other features have opted to head straight to digital rental. While heavy hitters such as **Black Widow**, **No Time to Die**, and **Wonder Woman 1984** have all been shunted back, one more offering that took a hit was Leigh Whannell's **The Invisible Man**. An invisible threat lurking in the shadows and making us ultimately question our own sanity? Coronavirus or **The Invisible Man**, you tell me. Then again, the title could just as easily apply to Boris Johnson, such is his frequent vanishing act. Whannell's spin on a familiar turn was phenomenal, with Elisabeth Moss delivering a career-best performance at the centre of **The Invisible Man**. In some weird moment of happenstance, it feels like **The Invisible Man**



The Real Invisible Man Strikes Again...

came along at just the right time for this most unique of situations we all find ourselves in.

Leigh Whannell has long been a favourite of ours here at **STARBURST** - with us sitting down to speak with the ever-charming Aussie five or six times over recent years - and so it's encouraging to see that **The Invisible Man**'s box office haul wasn't hit too hard by the global pandemic. Costing a modest \$7 million, the Universal and Blumhouse vehicle ended up nabbing a \$126 million box office haul before cinemas were forced to close their doors. Searching for a silver lining to the hand that **The Invisible Man** had been given, the picture was soon made available for digital rental, and thankfully that means more and more people have been afforded the opportunity to watch one of the genuinely great films of 2020.

Likewise, **Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)** was another movie quickly made available digitally. While it won't receive the critical acclaim of **The Invisible Man**, it's only fair to praise **Birds of Prey** for being a gloriously fun, ludicrously vibrant popcorn film that even the most sourpuss of moviegoers had to raise a smile at. Sure, it's easy to throw shade and ridicule at some of the movies released since Warner Bros launched their DC Extended Universe back with **Man of Steel** in 2013, yet the antics of Margot Robbie's Harleen and her new **Birds of Prey** buddies provided us all with some much needed light relief - with Jurnee Smollett-Bell's Black Canary kicking all kinds of ass as she regularly stole the show.

It wouldn't be **It's Only a Movie** without at least a mild rant, of course, and this month the finger of disappointment is pointed firmly at **The Grudge**. Like so many of you, I had a slightly perplexed mumble to myself at the news that

The Grudge was being revisited and given a fresh lick of paint. That lick of paint resulted in a confused, muddled picture that was ultimately pegged as a 'sidequel' - which is a new one on us. But while **The Invisible Man** took an existing IP and put a new spin on it to make it feel ripe and relevant, **The Grudge** did the exact opposite. Despite genre faves Lin Shaye and John Cho doing their utmost to bring some semblance of credibility to **The Grudge**, the film never feels like anything more than a pointless waste of time for all involved. Overused jump scares and gratuitous gore are utilised as a way to cover up for the piss-poor plot at the centre of this movie, and it really is a headscratcher that anyone would ever think **The Grudge** was a wise idea. Considering just how chilling and engaging Takashi Shimizu's 2002 **Ju-On: The Grudge** was, it's disappointing to see how much Hollywood is determined to milk this particular teat until all sense of respect and actual quality has well and truly dried up. Which let's face it, for the **Grudge** franchise, things had gone bone dry a long, long time ago.

I digress, this has been an admittedly shorter than usual **It's Only a Movie** - y'know, what with that pandemic 'n' all - but here's hoping there'll be some more juicy topics to cover by the time of our next issue. Or at least Boris will have stopped his Invisible Man act by that point in time. In the meantime, stay safe, be well, and keep on keeping on.

Excelsior.



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The background of the entire advertisement is a dense collage of various Starburst magazine covers. The covers feature a variety of celebrities and themes, including Captain Marvel, Spider-Man, and Birds of Prey. The collage is set against a dark, textured background.

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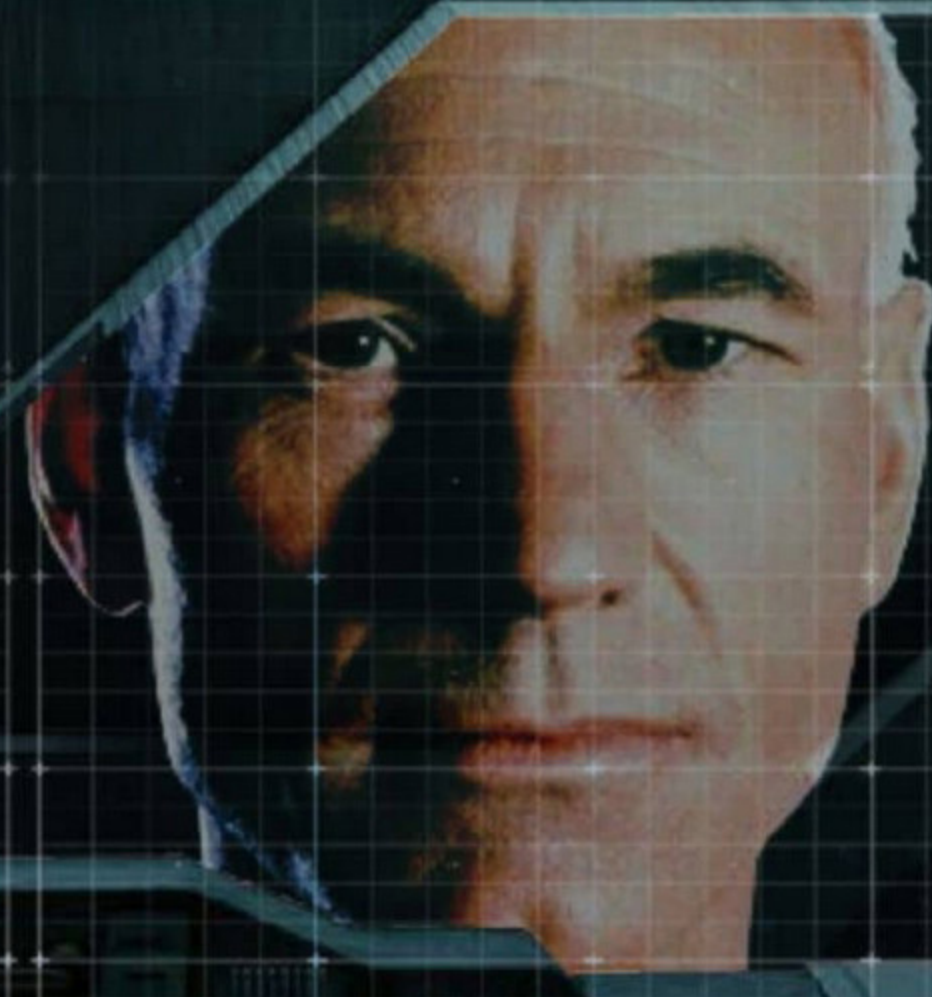
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